Towards rethinking research on quality in higher education

J. Zoe Jordens & Nick Zepke
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand
The meaning of quality in HE

- professionalism
- audit
- meets-standards-and-values-expectations
- resource
- fit-for-purpose
- measurable
- effective-learning
- communication
- independent-assessors
- systems
- motivation
- minimal-requirements
- moderation
- reviewing
- assessable
- improving
- equity
- well-being
- time
- transformational
- quality
- excellence
- well-rounded
- review
- reflective-lifelong-learner
- effective-teaching
- value-for-money

Knight & Trowler 2000  Type 1  Type 2  Harvey, Knight & SRHE 1996
Exploring Type 2 meaning of quality

- **Wicked**, not simple, problem (Krause 2012)
- Consider the purpose of education (Biesta 2009)
  - Development & enhancement
- **Transformation**
  - Complexity thinking (Davis & Sumara 2006; Mason 2008)
  - ‘Liminal space’ metaphor (Land *et al* 2014)
Researching quality in HE: strategy

Based on Davis & Sumara (2006); Haggis (2008).

Students

Lecturers

Managers

Institution

Government

And Employers and Social Groups and ...

Students
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitising concept (lens)</th>
<th>Description of lens for example of researching quality in undergraduate science education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem definition lens</strong></td>
<td>Problems with ‘quality’, for example, the reasons for difficulty in defining quality in undergraduate science education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openness lens</strong></td>
<td>Quality as boundary hopping, for example, openness to interactions from the outside, far from equilibrium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social complexity lens</strong></td>
<td>Quality as relationship: interactions between science lecturers and between science lecturers and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nonlinearity lens</strong></td>
<td>Quality as change: lecturers changing through multiple non-linear local interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Multiple ‘causality’ lens</strong></td>
<td>Quality as influence: the goals and concerns of, and influences on, science lecturers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem resolution and emergence of quality lens</strong></td>
<td>Findings about quality: strategies/proposals for science lecturers to engage with the problem.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example: Undergraduate science education

Problem definition lens

- Lecturers use different teaching approaches in same course
  - each defines quality differently [assumes each believes he/she is doing a ‘quality’ job]
  - individual factors play a role in definition of quality

- Resulting questions to ask for future improvement

  - Do lecturers consider what they do ‘quality’?
  - Consider:
    - meaning of quality for individual lecturers
    - personal background: culture, work experience, teaching qualifications, gender etc
Social complexity lens

- Interactions vary greatly:
  - Lecturer A – undergrad & postgrad students
  - Lecturer B, C – their research groups
  - Few interactions between lecturers
  - Few interactions between lecturers & managers

- Lack of interaction between lecturers within and beyond discipline

- Resulting questions to ask for future improvement
  - How do lecturers think interactions with other lecturers, within their discipline and in other science disciplines, could enhance quality?
  - How could these interactions be encouraged?
Summary of findings

- 6 lenses applied to the lecturer community – one part of the whole contributing to quality in undergraduate science education
- 5 process lenses focus on conditions conducive to emergence of quality as transformation – findings expressed as future research questions
- 6th lens – problem resolution & emergence of quality – a synthesis & proposal for future improvement:
  
  “How can you encourage and extend your interactions so that they help improve science education in the future?”
Conclusions

- Complexity, wickedity & transformation combined via sensitising concepts to research quality in HE
- Example of researching quality in undergraduate science education
- Findings focus on future improvement

Discussion question
How could this strategy apply to researching teaching or other research in your institution/environment?