**The power of judgment – discernment as empowerment**

**Engage master students in assessing quality in pedagogical vocational development projects and action research. This is a paper in progress, a rough sketch for an action research plan and a starting point for theoretical reasoning.**

**The aim of this paper**

The aim of this paper is exploring ways of engaging and involving master students in assessing quality in development projects and action research in the field of vocational pedagogy. It is also an aim to give an outline of the context I will be working in and do some small preliminary steps of theoretical reasoning. This is the very first part in my three year Phd-project. I will try to enter this work with an openness of mind and an “essayistic” attitude. By essayistic I am thinking of the way Michel de Montagne[[1]](#footnote-1) thought of the essay as a subjective treatment of a topic for the reason of trying out or attempting something. More order is for later.

There are many elements I want to investigate and am aware that this starting period of my project is a time for widening my search, cutting down, sharpening, including things I had not thought of, listening to advice, taking away, “killing” darlings, changing and experimenting. I have a dream that my summer school fellows are willing to challenge me in some of these ways, pick me up and facilitate my empowerment. I hope to leave Denmark on the 20th of August with a clearer head and greater sense of mastery than when I came on the 14th. Going home tired is an acceptable price to pay for this week, but going home with a feeling of powerlessness is not.

The school year 2011/2012 I will be working with first year master students in Vocational Pedagogy at Oslo and Akershus University College. One aim for the first year is to involve the students in recognizing quality. What kind of task this might be and how to facilitate such development is the issue at hand in this paper. There are some main perspectives I will be addressing:

* Quality of what?
* How to make quality visible through action research strategies?
* Developing criteria of assessment and evaluation through involvement.
* The power of judgment as empowerment.

**Some background information**

I have been working with master students since 2005. I have seen that there are areas of this education that has a potential for improvement. I have a concern that my students are not sufficiently able to recognize quality in a way that is practical for the development of their master projects. I want to explore a claim that students that have a clear notion and are able to judge good quality in a field, to a larger extend experience that they manage and master delivering work according to such standards. The notion of ‘standard’ is of course tricky. It can be understood as evaluation of a work that has been done. It can easily be thought of as ‘the standard’, as something that is clear in advance, something unshakeable and maybe even unchangeable. ‘Judgment’ and ‘standard’ will in itself be concepts that will be necessary to untangle. I will have to attend to this at a later stage of my project.

An alternative way of understanding quality assessment is to think of this as something we do for learning, for development, as learning and as development (Dobson, Eggen and Smith 2009:11-16). This way of understanding quality assessment is closer to my aim with this work than evaluation of something that has been done. At the same time I am aware that a more “objective” ‘evaluation of’ is a critical part of the total project equation. For now quality assessment and the power of judgment is in focus.

There are many challenges in a master education like this. The average student is more than 35 years of age. They often have a vast experience in their vocational field. This means that the students have quite clear ideas about good quality within their field. This understanding of quality is of course relevant and important to the quality assessment within the master studies. Most of the students have been working as vocational teachers for several years. In their everyday work they not only have to be able to judge good work, but also need to be able to facilitate their pupils in recognizing, developing, doing and understanding quality craftsmanship. The way the craftsman understands quality seems to give clues to the way I want to understand the issue at hand. A further exploration of Richard Sennett’s book *The Craftsman* (2008) is planned. There seems to be a potential to further develop the master education by finding ways that to a greater extent recognizes and makes use of the students experience. Not only can we make better use of the students experience but also their close contact with what is happening in their vocational field at the present time. One challenges of the Master Studies in Vocational Pedagogy is at all times to be sufficiently up to date with what is happening both in the actual vocational fields relevant to our students and in the schools that educate in these vocations. Our students come from all parts of working life and from many different vocational fields. Our most important contact with the individual students’ vocational field is the student herself.

This project is hopefully a two-way street were both the students’ increase their experience of mastery and the Master Studies evolve. The aim is that both my colleagues and I, who run this education, and the students, further develop our power of judgment and experience empowerment through discernment.

This paper is part of my Phd-project were the working title is: *Investigate and further develop ways to assess and evaluate pedagogical vocational development projects and action research when this is the core activity in education.* One of the first steps in this three year project is to collaborate with my students in developing criteria of assessment and evaluation through action research. Through a process of a future workshop, in the style of Müllert and Jungk, I want to challenge my students to express examples of quality or lack of quality and use this as a starting point for reflection. Further we will through dialog outline future possibilities and develop practical ways of implementing these ideas in to the students work with their master projects.

**Quality of what?**

Both for my student and me a starting point of analysis will be investigating forms of knowledge. When we are assessing quality it is knowledge of some sort that is in question. As an input I want to use the book *The ways of Aristotle* by Olav Eikeland (2008). I have done some preliminary reading and like the way Eikeland distinguishes between knowledge of using, making, doing, changing ... Both for my master students, their pupils and me it is relevant to investigate how to recognize, handle and assess quality related to using, making, doing and changing. Also Eikeland’s perspectives on practical wisdom, logics and perfection are relevant for this project.

Greek philosophy both in the writings of Aristotle and Plato is relevant for the project. One set of relevant perspectives is related to judging representations for example through text. Proposals for judgment are in the case of Plato recognition, function and benefit. I will come back to this point to some degree later. Another set of relevant perspectives is related to making wise judgment through a combination of thinking, feeling, acting, reflecting and altering. I will be investigating Eikeland’s book and some of the writings of both Aristotle and Plato in depth. I will present relevant perspectives for dialog and inquiry to my students. Though I am not overly optimistic about this point, I will challenge my students to join me in the exploration of literature written in English. The first year the students often have more than enough with the recommended Norwegian literature and are not easy to tempt with extra reading.

In my experience it is not enough to involve students through asking: “What do you want?” The Master Study in Vocational Pedagogy has an open-ended profile. It is the intention that the students participate in an education that is relevant, meaningful, involving and characterized by unity and coherence. This means that we must ask our students what they experience as relevant, meaningful, involving, uniting and coherent. Our students professional needs, interests, wants and dreams are core elements of what we think is necessary for real involvement and empowerment. They are also the sources of our students’ motivation. To tap into these sources is to access and make use of great energies for learning, change and development.

Never the less, these needs, interests, wants and dreams are a lot of the time neither clear to our students nor us. My experience coincides here with notions from Donald Schön (1983), Paulo Freire 1999) and people from our own institution like Hilde Hiim (2010). There is a need to make our tacit knowledge and also our tacit needs, interests, wants and dreams visible through words and other representations. This can both be a process of showing how to do so through examples, but also by giving credit to practical examples as a great source of both putting into words and representing in other ways. Let me give an example of what I mean here. How would you answer the following question? “What characterizes an excellent tied necktie?” This tacit knowledge is for me much easier to draw or show than to explain with words. Put in another way, this is not something that is easy for me to explain over the phone. Another example can be asking the question: "What values do you base your everyday work upon?” This is a very difficult question. I have asked this question to teachers, health workers, students, aluminum workers and others. Very few are able to give a clear answer or an answer at all. On the other hand, if I ask the same people, and especially if I give an example, most people can answer this question and tell this story with ease. Here is how I do it: “Can you tell me a story about a recent incident when you felt you did excellent work? An example from my work is the other day when a student came up to me after class and said that she had discovered things this lesson she had never thought of before.”

The story, the narrative, the demonstration or the example will be important elements for facilitating my students to make visible their notions of quality. As far as I can see this might be key elements for the way we will investigate through the whole process of this project. I believe the Greek thinkers have exiting input relevant to this point. As mentioned earlier Plato discussed ways of representing. For instance he discusses how truth can be represented through song, play, dance, parables and metaphors. This might for us seem somewhat alien. As an example, he gave representing truth through a combination of song and dance special attention when it came to learning youth virtue (Laws II). He also discussed representation of truth through more, for us common ways, like logical use of words and narratives. He expresses criteria for the judgment of representations in this book. A good representation is recognizable, functions well and benefits long term. In vocational pedagogy words are often fragile and weak when put to the challenge of representing the skills and products of the craftsman. Pictures, demonstrations and other representations are often far more recognizable and effective.

Stories, narratives, demonstrations, examples and other more recognizable representations can of course be deconstructed, organized and made abstract. They can be transformed into concepts and “meta-concepts” for pinpointing and extracting standards of quality. At the same time something always seems to be lost when the story or the easy attainable representation is abstracted. Many times a short story often seems both more accurate and understandable that a constructed “high-precision” concept. As a philosopher I am acquainted with many such high-precision concepts. I still get confused with Austin’s concepts ‘Locutionary’, ‘Illocutionary’ and ‘Perlocutionary’. Austin’s examples are much easier to understand.

Just here is an important point. It can be argued that all I really need to do is to learn the concepts and their definitions properly. My argument is that there is much more at stake here. What is at stake is for instance ways of representing truth that is not only recognizable but are also “just as true” or with “just as high precision” as the more abstract alternatives. Also this is part of a discussion of democracy. The narrative, I believe, opens for more democratic involvement. In this field were the students in many ways are the experts participation in making criteria for quality assessment visible is essential. I will not take this discussion further at this time, but indicate reasons for my choices in facilitating my students in the way I am planning.

**How to make quality visible through action research strategies?**

My first step in the actual action research with my students is to initiate a climate for real involvement and democracy. The first time we meet in September I will present my plan for the students. They will be asked if they want to participate. The plan will not deviate much from ordinary first year studies. The big difference will be that our collaboration will to a greater extent be documented and analyzed. I have done this several times with other student groups and so far I have not experienced one student saying no to a deal like this. As a matter of fact, the students have for a large part felt privileged to be at the center of attention in a research project. I expect much of the same reactions in this case.

The last two years the former first year master students have, in their first week, participated in a future workshop in the style of Müllert and Jungk (1989). A future workshop will also be the starting point of our collaboration. I will in this workshop initiate a focus on quality and challenge the students to start telling each other stories about quality and lack of quality from their own work life and experience. This first phase is an interpretation and an adaptation of Müllert and Jungk’s critique phase. In their own book they challenge facilitator’s of future workshops to adapt their process tools in ways that are relevant for the situation and the participants.

The second phase in the process will be investigating how quality and our individual praxis’s can be improved (Whitehead and McNiff 2009:18). This is the phase that is paralleled to what Robert Jungk and Norbert Müllert would call the phase of utopias or the fantasy phase. In this phase we will make it clear that our imagination needs space and nurture. Big ideas and “wild” dreams will get special attention.

The implementation phase will be the students planning of their own pedagogical vocational development projects and action research projects. The way this is to be done in the future workshop is not yet entirely clear. The students’ projects usually evolve much slower than the timeframe of the future workshop permits.

**How to develop criteria of assessment and evaluation through involvement?**

Through the autumn, until the time the students will be handing in their documentation for assessment and evaluation, I will challenge the students to participate in making assessment criteria’s for their own project papers. I have tried this earlier, inspired by Hilde Hiim, with great success. My last group of students agreed on seventeen criteria’s of quality. These were not master students but first year bachelor teacher students. They were influenced through our dialog and reflections, and by my input through the semester. I need to stress that the criteria were the choices of the students. My own attendance and experience was present as a kind of quality assurance. I did not find it necessary to add or remove any criteria. The students suggested more than forty criteria, but only voted for using seventeen of them. All criteria that got one vote or more were accepted and put into use.

The criteria served both as a background for dialog between the students and as a kind of expectation for my feedback to the students. All the students got as a minimum feedback according to the criteria. All fifty two students also got five to ten additional comments. We had a deal that in order to be permitted to give one negative critical remark I had to find at least five positive remarks. This rule also applied between the students. It was interesting to experience that no student was unable to fulfill the criteria. As an experienced educator I can say that the criteria were not too easy. This I found fascinating. The students mastered delivering papers according to solid criteria. The criteria again were in good accordance with the curriculum of the course.

It can be argued that this standard would be too subjective, so in the next semester we engaged a sensor from another institution. The results did not deviate in any great extent from my own the former semester. Actually of the 48 students who finished the course, no student received lower than C from the sensor. This actually was a worry for the institution. Too many good grades is often interpreted as negative niceness. In this case I want at least to suggest some alternative explanations:

* The students knew what they were doing.
* The standard was clear.
* Our strategy worked.

At the end of the year all the students were asked to evaluate the course. The students reported a feeling of empowerment. They knew the standard they had to deliver in accordance to and felt confident in doing so. Several students even reported that they thought the final exam was relevant and fun. I have documentation from this process that will be presented for my master students.

The master students I will be working with this semester will through the semester both be working in a classroom environment (approximately 30-35 students) and in smaller groups (4-5 students). There is always a big focus on assessment in the smaller groups. At the same time there is often a certain amount of frustration that the groups work in accordance to, what the students feel are, different standards. We who run the education feel this is a natural consequence of the staff different interests, specialties and backgrounds. Through the four years the part time master study lasts, the students will therefor change group leaders (our staff) three times. In this way we feel the students over time get in contact with a wider perspective of the field of vocational pedagogy. The students’ frustration decreases through the course of the four years. It is especially the first two years the students are frustrated about this. By explicating and to a greater extent involving the students in making criteria of quality visible, and further develop them, this might be a way of facilitating a greater feeling of unity in the way we execute the student groups and the education. This is not the main issue. The main issue is to further develop an ability and power of judgment and thereby be empowered.

**The power of judgment as empowerment**

John Dewey writes an interesting chapter in his book *Democracy and education* (1916). The chapter is called *The Nature of Method.* I hope I am brave enough to write a chapter with a headline like that someday . Dewey writes of what characterizes effective thinking. Effective thinking is characterized by directness, open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility. He is an optimist and believes this is the natural way the mind works. If the mind does not work this way it is because it is in some way being obstructed or hindered. As a closing point in this paper I want to suggest a kind of explanation to why the mastering of quality assessment and the understanding of quality and judgment of quality is so important. I quote:

By responsibility as an element in intellectual attitude is meant the disposition to consider in advance the probable consequences of any projected step and deliberately to accept them: to accept them in the sense of taking into account, acknowledging them in action, not yielding mere verbal accent. Ideas, as we have seen, are intrinsically standpoints and methods for bringing about a solution of a perplexing situation; forecast calculated to influence responses. It is only too easy to think that one accepts a statement or believes a suggested truth when one has not considered its implications; when one has made but a cursory and superficial survey of what further things one is committed to by acceptance. Observation and recognition, belief and assent, then becomes names for lazy acquiescence in what is externally presented.

It would be much better to have fewer facts and truths in instruction – that is, fewer things supposedly accepted, - if a smaller number of situations could be intellectually worked out to the point where conviction meant something real – some indication of the self with the type of conduct demanded by facts and foresight of results. The most permanent bad results of undue complication of school subjects and congestion of school studies and lessons are not the worry, nervous strain, and superficial acquaintance that follow (serious as they are), but the failure to make clear what is involved in really knowing and believing a thing (Dewey 1985:185-186).

Talk about setting a standard. It seems like John Dewey is here at the core of education, and maybe investigating the power of judgment is just that.

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