Open Up an Account Ability Gap for Real Learning

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Abstract: Education is about embracing productive social experience in the present, just as preparing for roles in the future. For schooling to be re-conceptualised to realise the potential of Knowledge Building requires a rethink in the nature and function of audit and accountability. My analysis is framed in the mismatch between audit, pedagogy and assessment in school reforms in Scotland. A new national approach from 2004 was centred on fostering capacities of potential, expressly building approaches at school level. I found that audit has a lot of unlearning to do to assist and be part of such approaches. Those in audit roles, individually and institutionally, require to engage respectfully with conceptual and theoretical realms formed within school communities. I urge that external audit now work with us in schools, practically and conceptually, to link components of our systems, enabling them to cohere and serve purpose – ours, not theirs. I identify an account ability gap wherein audit is not set up to give an account of itself. I seek that accountability enter into a design experiment within and as part of schooling integral to the unprecedented social and technological changes now occurring and in which schooling is ever more formatively embedded.

Talk

For nearly a decade and a half from 2001 I was the class-committed principal of a small rural primary school in Scotland. Being devolved for education in the UK, the then Scottish Executive and its curriculum agency, Learning and Teaching Scotland, brought in a new curriculum framework from 2004. Its central purpose was to foster children's potential as four capacities of responsibility, confidence, contribution and learning. These capacities were set in layered conceptual and operational components. This was an expressly transformational national endeavour. The capacities were framed as embodiments of potential centred on personal development, awareness and capability. It was a major shift from the hitherto focus on targetised attainment. Learning became part of something bigger – more intrinsic, more purposive, more relevant, more connected. This was a bold redirection of expressed goals for a national school education system. The initiative came about following a two-year national conversation of educators and all communities of interest. The incoming framework linked changing modes of consciousness arising through new digital media, assessment for learning, global citizenship, re-localisation, and new forms of collaborative learning, amongst much else.

To bring the endeavour to life we were asked to 'build the curriculum' – a collegiate developmental strategy of that name. This was not simply another initiative. The task was to reframe purpose and transform practice to it. We were asked to build this philosophy in our schools within the nationally agreed framework. It was not about prescription, and certainly not about imposed procedures. This was about re-visioning education. We were asked to make all this work for us in our locales, fashioned according to our context and needs. This was the basis of school education policy in Scotland for the twelve years to January 2016 when it underwent major alteration.

In Plockton Primary School we were enthusiastic exponents of the 2004-16 review principles and the central four-capacities approach. We opened up new opportunities through new technological potentialities and community linked approaches, but what was really new was the thinking. It was about intrinsic meaning in learning. It was about being. This new approach to education was to dispose the mind to think in new ways, to open up new potential through new means, technological and social. It was not about performance, or delivery or targets or tracking. It was about purpose. It was about ownership. We embraced these broad goals, working with the national curriculum agency, our local authority employer and national education department on collaborative action research projects, some of which we competitively bid for and were awarded. We worked with partners near and far. Our practice formed case studies of external bodies. I only touch on what we undertook, what altered, what successes and difficulties we encountered and what we achieved. Of central importance is what this all meant at the individual pupil/student level.

Our goal was that the pupils/students become the owners of these tasks and of the purposes wherein they lay. This is a higher order understanding of learning, developing oneself in collaborative interchange. We made major wholescale changes to our planning, development, assessment and organisational procedures and frameworks in accordance with the new national endeavour.

However, there was one problem my colleagues and I could not overcome. It was the misalignment of approaches and determinations of external inspection and its local authority bedfellow 'quality assurance,' pertaining to theoretical constructs, methodology and data integrity. These audits imposed judgements as imposed text and grades to pre-existing grade descriptors. But they did not make sense in the context of the then current reforms. Nor was there transparent articulation of data, method, analysis and substantiation.

I was in an out-of-school role from 2013. This gave me the opportunity to enter into a reflective and analytical mode as to our school achievements, and the nature of their transformation, concerning what was going on in our national system, and beyond. I analysed these, based on practice and development, wrote these thoughts up and presented on them, worldwide. I came to reflect on my role as the local lead manager, and also practitioner with a more than three-quarters full-time teaching commitment 2001 to mid-2012. I came to understand the promoters and inhibitors of system change. I came to the realisation that our audit agencies were opposed to the curriculum framework because they were misaligned to its conceptual rationale and hence their procedures and practices followed suit. In some of their documentation this is even explicit. I found there to be concomitant ethical issues. I presented at international congresses on Scotland's central four capacities reform throughout the world. As I did in Chile, Indonesia, the US, Canada, Singapore, Norway and Morocco so did they. But what they and I presented was entirely contradictory, yet based on the same national system. Note that I was presenting on enacted policy of over a decade to national guidelines from my stance as teacher practitioner and school principal.

My challenge to you here that I would like to share with you is how to deal with the mismatch between audit and curriculum. The challenge lies in shifting underlying concepts and assumptions to address essential questions, such as: What form of curriculum? (Not just as content). What form of audit? To what purpose? And for what lived reality on the way there?

Education is very much about the journey (as being – the lived experience) not only the end point (outcome as 'results'). Evaluation is (should be) about evidential engagement to enable learning disposing to action to optimise function to achieve purpose. It is not an act of judgement. It is about meaning and understanding to serve need and enable potential. Distil purpose. Generate meaning. Seek data. Garner insight. Generate knowledge. Adjust. Investigate. Learn. Reflect. Then stop. Smile. Look about. Be. And carry on.

I loved my job. We had a great time, but then we had a terrible time. Only slowly did I come to understand why. We had a terrible time *because* we were having a great time. We were getting somewhere, achieving something original, going somewhere new but in an audit, policy, reform and external accountability world which was not. There came to be a fundamental conceptual mismatch. Our curriculum agency did one thing, and our audit agency did another. We were pulled in two directions. I came to see that this is about institutional power. The problem is that the modes of thought are determined by audit. Instead they should be determined by purpose, derived from needs and potentials enabled through organisational means, and realised in practice, altering iteratively. What is needed is to reframe audit, with integral understanding, by bringing schools and their communities into the process as partners. It may then be possible to re-humanise audit and transform it to build organisational knowledge. I seek a change towards this mode of thinking and practice right across our system, and beyond. Productive purposive change in school education is not possible without it.

For me personally, I would wish to be enabled to do my job in a remote little school in the far North-West seaboard of Europe, but the contradictions rendered it impossible. It is the challenge I pose to you here, which I seek the wisdom of the crowd to solve.

Can we make external governance, accountability and reform serve our needs as school communities, rather than we serve theirs? Can we make school communities the agents of education system change? Can we turn we and they into us working together? I think we can! That is why I am here. We need a re-humanised school education system, and meta-system.

To do that we need to reframe our thinking. We have some unlearning to do first. We need to unpack accountability, turn it inside out, break it apart, and then re-form it, which is the true meaning of reform. Is accountability *able* to give an *account* of itself and so itself become *account able?* Mind the gap between the two words which is that of real learning and is where our humanity resides. We must rediscover the relationship between the parts in our immense school systems. They need to work together, as systems, not as fractured components.

This is where audit relates to the design experiment overview of this Knowledge Building Institute. Just as we as educators need new analytic tools to relate to rapidly altering pedagogies addressing new and rapidly altering societal needs, so do those who relate to us. As education moves ever more out of the classroom, literally and virtually, becoming more intrinsic and embedded in society, not just preparing 'learners' for future life roles but enabling them to enter into them within education settings, so the process becomes ever more collaborative, building knowledge, as students enter into design mode as part of their school life. This is even in younger age groups.

Society, through various institutions and communities of interest, including government, funding agencies, communities and parents seek means of engagement in the processes we enable in schools, and other education institutions. They have a right of involvement but also in new forms of engagement which echo the changes underway in education practice. Thus as education moves to and as a design experiment so do and must the forms of accounting, by which I mean how we give and receive accounts, constructing understanding and meaning as intrinsic accountability. Thus there is a need for accountability to enter into design mode. Its altering forms, serving very different needs, need to become an iterative experiment, integral to the functions, roles and purposes of our education institutions and the individuals within them, in all roles. Accountability, and all its bedfellows – audit, inspection, quality review, regulation, evaluation and so on – having subtle different nuances, need to become learning processes in themselves. They are processes steered by individuals, and those persons may shift roles, as we educators, and indeed students may become partners in, and indeed agents of accountability. Accountability as a process may then become built in and integral. It may come to function as a system and within the greater systems which it serves and of which it is a part. I wrote my 2011 paper as a class-committed school principal to provide a penetrative critique of difficulties and obstacles at the systemic level which were hindering my job function, and that of my colleagues, within Scotland's school education reforms and as they related to our societal context which is global. The paper also opened up a critique through conceptual and theoretical elaboration. It also outlined what was working well and why and how we may give an *account* of that, how and according to whose agenda. My point is that there are choices and they serve purposes as relate to needs and potentials. There is no one right way of audit and accountability. The presentations and papers of mine cited here formed the basis of this overview talk which represents the continuing evolution of the process, as does my involvement in the Knowledge Building community. All those with whom I and colleagues liaised and collaborated form a conduit through this. Accountability needs to become an enabler, from now into the future, not a disabler, as recently up to now.

So what can I, those who come after me in my job and role and those steering our local, regional and national system do about all this? Telling us what to do in schools is not the answer. But nor should we be left alone. We need to build relationships of all kinds at all levels which are mutual and constructive. With regard to accountability how may we reframe practices and assumptions about the linkage of audit and pedagogy? Can account ability replace accountability? Can we all become *account able* in holistic, meaningful, purposive and constructive interrelationships replacing destructive, one-way, one-sided accountability? Can we construct a design experiment of, and as, accountability? Are there solutions out there? Let's build them. Over to you.

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