Quality assurance processes and creativity in teaching and learning: lessons from the creative industries (0294)

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Introduction

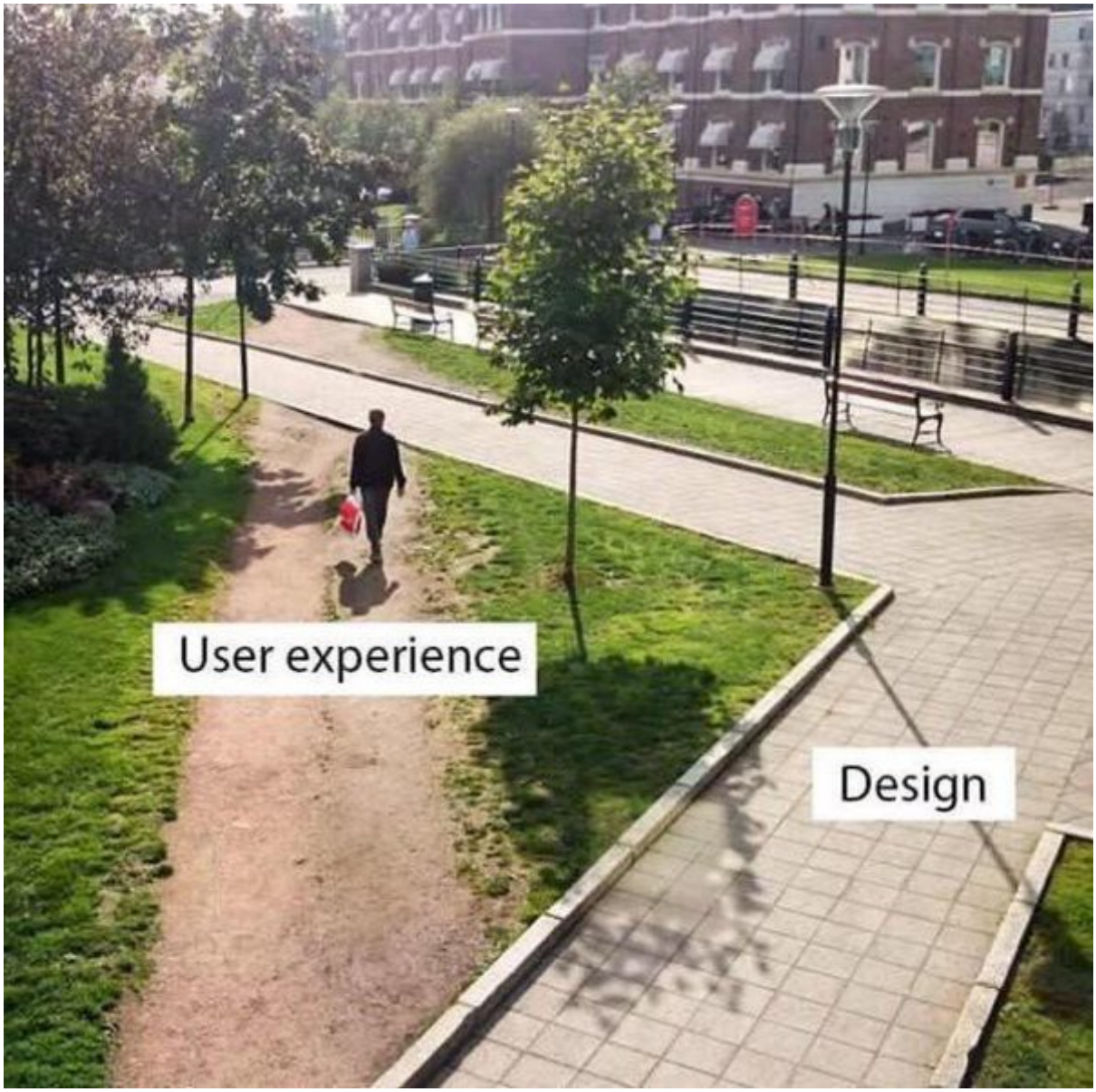

Figure 1: User experience v design via Twitter (https://twitter.com/arjunsethi/status/613473156469145600)

A photograph circulating on various social media networks depicts a park seen from above. The park is laid out formally with lawns and paths laid out at right angles. One of the

sections of lawn has a path that has been carved in to it by pedestrians seeking the quickest route.

The user-created paths are examples of creativity, behaviour outside the rules but also a reshaping of the environment to suit immediate needs. As important as the actions of the users are the responses of the authorities – do they treat users as transgressors, creating more barriers and rules, or do they learn from them and adapt accordingly?

Quality Assurance processes often focus on a need to 'meet sector requirements for academic standards, and operate within a framework of regulations and quality assurance policies' (University of Surrey, n.d.). Seeing frameworks as a constraint, rather than a structure on which to build, is typical of non-creative cultures, while creative thinkers see constraints as opportunities and things to challenge. To some extent the perception, accurate or otherwise, that regulatory structures forbid experimentation could be fertile conditions for breeding rebellion. However, this suggests that innovation is something that happens in isolation and in secret (Kleiman, 2008), and that creativity and experimentation are frowned upon.

This contrasts markedly with the way in which the creative and technology sectors develop cultures of innovation, with a preference for openness, collaboration and iterative experimentation.

Do Quality Assurance processes limit creativity?

QA processes in Higher Education are based on models borrowed from manufacturing and ensure that the process produces the same thing every time, without variation and with quality assured beforehand. Contrast this with the *creation* of inventions, ideas, user interfaces, assistive devices, vehicles, films, novels: creativity requires variation, chance, and risk.

Universities are more analogous to creative organisations than factories.

Quality Assurance (QA) in higher education generally means a focus on processes, outcomes and institutional function (Brennan, 2012) or, more bluntly, making sure 'you are doing the right things, the right way' (Glazer, n.d.). 'Total Quality Management' is based on the principle of getting things 'right first time' (Chartered Quality Institute, n.d.). This 'sits uneasily with academic concepts of the provisionality of knowledge and the value of enquiry and exploration' or, to put it another way, with 'creativity' (Gordon and Owen, n.d.).

Quality Enhancement (QE) on the other hand is 'taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students' (University of Aberdeen, 2015). It is reflective nature and less judgemental than QA, looking back on activities rather than managing forwards, and identifying aspects that worked well and those that could be improved. Like TQM it is intended to be collegiate (and in Scotland the Quality Enhancement Framework expects students to be fully involved in the process) but unlike TQM it accepts that things may not be 'right first time' – it recognizes the reality of imperfection. QE does not recognize 'best practice' because the idea that one approach can be 'better' than every other makes no sense within a culture of continual enhancement. It also accepts variations not just between courses but within them, and between different iterations of the same course.

Swinglehurst et al. (2008) suggest a useful table showing the key differences between QE and QA:

Quality Assurance	**Quality Enhancement**
Focus on teaching	Focus on learning
Teaching as individual “performance”	Learning as “social practice”
Focus on monitoring/judgement	Focus on professional development
“Top down” implementation by managers not active in teaching	Active engagement of senior staff and teachers during implementation
Inflexible, non-negotiable approach based on “standards”	Flexible context-sensitive approach based on building professional knowledge
Little acknowledgment of the link between teaching and research	Seeks to establish links between teaching and research, through reflection on practice
May undermine professional autonomy through monitoring and surveillance activity	Respects and values professional autonomy
Focuses on the teacher as an individual practitioner	Seeks to increase collaboration between teachers and across disciplines
Emphasis on documentation	Emphasis on discussion

Table 1: The distinction between QA and QE (Swinglehurst et al., 2008)

QA processes focus on innovation (the production of *things* – courses and graduates) and seek to control or limit creativity (whether deliberately or accidentally). QE approaches, on the other hand, permit the type of experimentation and variability that is a hallmark of creative approaches.

Lessons from the creative industries

The underlying purpose of many QA approaches is to eradicate defects through the creation of and adherence to processes. In such a system, experimentation and risk-taking are forbidden; however these are essential for creativity to occur. Contrast this with Design Thinking, an approach to innovation that seeks to increase value by *encouraging* experimentation and risk-taking.

Design is not, as commonly believed, ‘making things look nice’. Sir George Cox in a review for HM Treasury (2006) provides a useful definition: ‘Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end.’

Design is not the result of random acts but of a process. Design Thinking (DT) is an attempt to define that process and covers a range of approaches and a general philosophical attitude

to problem solving. It is, according to Tim Brown, 'a human-centered approach to innovation' (IDEO, n.d.)

DT is usually depicted as a process with five distinct stages, which repeat and loop back as often as necessary:

Figure 2: The Design Thinking Process

What distinguishes DT from other models of creativity is that it sees creativity as a way to *define* a problem, rather than simply a way to solve it. This is an important point because many approaches to innovation/creativity see them simply as ways in which objectives will be met, with those objectives being defined by market demand, government, investors, competitors and so on. Brown's point about DT being human-centred is that it places 'users' or 'stakeholders' at the centre of the process to understand what their needs are, rather than seeing them as passive recipients of a service or product.

The research

Within my role as a senior manager at a large university with responsibility for curriculum development, I am implementing various DT methods to create new courses and enhance existing ones. This is an attempt to break out of conventional and restricting views of QA, and relies heavily on two key theories of creativity, Csikszentmihalyi's systems model (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi and Sawyer, 1995) and Amabile's componential model (Amabile, 2013; Collins and Amabile, 1999). This poster will present an overview of the key differences between QA and QE approaches, and compare them with approaches to development within the creative industries. A brief summary of two DT-based projects – the development of graduate attributes within a School of Art and Design, and the writing of two BA programmes – will be shown along with a description of the methods used. The poster and the research offer an alternative to dominant approaches to QA in universities, one which promotes creativity and risk taking.

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