



Finding quality in quality improvement: creativity and credibility in higher education

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Abstract

This opinion piece explores the importance of credibility, reciprocity, and creativity in the quality assurance work of boundary-crossing third space professionals. As educational support professionals (ESPs), we believe that our multiple sources of knowledge and liminal positions are invaluable in guiding quality assurance processes. Our discussion is grounded in Little and Green's (2022) credibility framework and emphasises the importance of creativity to ensure authentic continuous improvement within a mandatory provincial audit. We suggest that it is imperative, both individually and institutionally, to champion third space professionals in quality assurance roles and ensure they receive the resources they require to meaningfully engage in this work.

Keywords: quality assurance; third space professionals; credibility; educational developers.

Introduction

This opinion piece explores the importance of credibility, reciprocity, and creativity in the quality assurance work of boundary-crossing third space professionals. As educational support professionals (ESPs), we believe that our multiple sources of knowledge and liminal positions are invaluable in guiding institutional-level quality assurance processes.

We are approaching this framework as third-space professionals working at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. Emma McCallum has a joint position as the Education and Learning Coordinator for the Human Rights and Equity Office (HREO) and the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Based in both these units, Emma's work supports Indigenization-Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Anti-racism (I-EDIAA) principles in education across the university. Within the context of Queen's University's quality assurance processes, Emma supports units in reviewing, understanding, and reflecting on I-EDIAA within their unit. Emma also trains units on how to use the Diversity and Equity Assessment and Planning (DEAP) tool, an innovative and award-winning tool developed by the Human Rights and Equity Office which guides units in creating action plans for enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in their programmes. Nevena Martinović is an Educational Developer at the CTL focused on curriculum development. Within the cyclical review process, she provides units with guidance on crafting programme-level learning outcomes and ensuring curricular alignment through workshops, webinars, consultations, and orientations. Quality assurance is only one of the hybrid and professionalised "niche' functions" (Whitchurch, 2008, pp.384) we are involved in within the university, however, the rest of our work in our respective portfolios complements our quality assurance leadership.

This discussion of credibility and creativity builds on the work of Whitchurch (2008; 2012), McKay and Robson (2023), and is grounded in Little and Green's (2022) credibility framework and its three elements of trustworthiness, expertise, and identification. We recognise the crucial role of third space professionals in design, development, and maintenance of the quality assurance process (Graham, 2012). We believe credibility is especially important within high-stakes processes like Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAP). As ESPs, the value of our involvement in this process depends upon perceptions of our professional credibility and that of the central units we work from and represent (Little and Green, 2022). Without it, we are unable to lead reflection and change. While credibility is fundamental for all our work as educational professionals, we find it particularly important in this context, as quality assurance has become increasingly important due to more focus on excellence and efficiency in education (Graham, 2012). The quality assurance process can be especially challenging and emotional for units. After all, departmental heads and chairs are experts in their specific academic fields; their training has not been in the field of provincial regulations for curricular innovation and improvement. As a result, these necessary regulations and guidelines can initially appear

overwhelming and in opposition to the opportunity the process provides for creativity and innovation. The fear of “getting it wrong” can often get in the way of growth.

While this paper focuses on how we leverage credibility as third space professionals, we are cognisant of the ways third space professionals often need to self-advocate to be recognised as credible and vital to the work we do (Smith et al., 2021). The need to self-advocate often stems from the hierarchical divide between educational support professionals and faculty, and the ambiguous, misunderstood, and sometimes contentious nature of third space roles (Szekeres, 2011; Graham, 2012; Kallenberg, 2016; Hall, 2022; Smith et al., 2021). We are also critical of the ways credibility is often synonymised with academic credentials, and the ways academic elitism privileges certain experiences above others (Whitchurch, 2012; Kehm, 2015; Hall, 2022; Little and Green, 2022). This is something we are especially conscious of as dual-role professionals: Emma completed her graduate degree alongside her fulltime ESP work and as a result was student and staff at the same time, while Nevena teaches as an Adjunct Professor in the English department in addition to her work in the CTL.

In the following opinion piece, we use Little and Green’s (2022) credibility framework to describe how we both employ trustworthiness, expertise, and identification within the quality assurance process and our cross-unit collaborations. We will further highlight why we consider creativity to be a crucial complement to credibility within our work as third space professionals.

Trustworthiness

As third space professionals working in quality assurance, our credibility deeply relies on our trustworthiness, which according to Little and Green (2022), is a blend of benevolence, integrity, and ability.

First and foremost, our trustworthiness is grounded in our alignment with trusted centralised units: the HREO and the CTL. Both function from a position of non-authority and support: they are not evaluators or managing bodies, but experts guiding reflection and encouraging research-informed continuous improvement for the university. This positive impression is valuable in establishing a sense of benevolence and integrity within

the quality assurance process, which then establishes a baseline of trust. Our credibility as institutionally supported educators helps to demonstrate the value of our knowledge and experience to units, while our third space orientation allows us to engage in this work with units as collaborators and consultants, as opposed to evaluators.

While units are encouraged to reach out to the HREO and the CTL while composing their self-study and working through the cyclical review process, their work does not require our approval. In fact, we specifically abstain from individual and committee work that require us to approve or evaluate units' self-studies. This structural advantage mitigates tensions and results in greater agency for the units and increased trust in us as credible collaborators (Henkin and Persson, 1992; Graham, 2012). Units can choose if and how they want to engage with our support, which ensures we are perceived as knowledgeable peers rather than authoritative gatekeepers or passive checkpoints. Additionally, our guidance is grounded in both our knowledge of the quality assurance process, and our complementary lived experience in educational research, development and instruction. Consequently, we model the practices that we encourage units to undergo: we engage in our own continuous improvement and our commitments to student success informed by I-EDIAA. We are not outside inquisitors unaffected by institutional quality assurance, but potential collaborators invested in the unit's positive outcomes.

Expertise

Our credibility within the context of expertise is leveraging our specialised curriculum and I-EDIAA knowledge. While I-EDIAA work on campus happens formally and informally across many units and positions on campus, the HREO is an integral central unit dedicated to this work. The HREO plays a key role in educating, advising, and enacting I-EDIAA principles and practices across campus. Within the quality assurance process, the HREO offers expertise around unit-specific data, university strategic I-EDIAA goals, and I-EDIAA education and resources. The HREO also trains units in using the DEAP tool, a self-audit tool through which units engage in programme-specific reflection and cyclical goal setting. Our specific expertise is also evidence of the "up-skilling" and professionalisation of para-academic staff (Kehm, 2015).

Additionally, the CTL complements the HREO's support of the quality assurance process with workshops, retreats, and consultations focused on curriculum development. The CTL has developed an annual series of workshops that guide units through the process of creating and innovating their programme-level learning outcomes, and ensuring that these outcomes are aligned with assessments, and teaching and learning activities. Similarly, the CTL designs retreats and consultations that guide units through identifying their signature pedagogies, crafting authentic assessments, navigating curriculum mapping, and bringing their I-EDIAA goals into their programme design. Both the HREO and CTL are involved in the orientation process for the quality assurance cohorts to ensure that these supports are accessible and welcoming.

Identification

In addition to our explicitly defined expertise, third space professionals are often required to be “jack of all trades,” flexing our skills in diverse ways across the university (Smith et al., 2021). The multifaceted nature and hybridity of our work means we have many touchpoints with staff, faculty, and units both within and outside the quality assurance process. For example, both Emma and Nevena are engaged in academic and non-academic activities, such as committee work, leading and facilitating programming, research and resource development, mentoring, and advising. Additionally, as there is no singular path into educational development, the CTL and HREO benefit from a multiplicity and diversity of knowledge sources. Emma has an academic background in Social Justice and Education, as well as a professional background in teaching, social service delivery, and educational consulting. Nevena has an academic background in English Literature and Theatre Studies, as well as a professional background in education-focused non-profit work, university teaching, and academic support for students from equity-deserving communities. Furthermore, we have knowledge and insight as Queen's University alumni and community members, who are personally invested in the institution's commitment to world-class research and education. Through these experiences, we are conscious of the difference in treatment we have experienced in our varying on-campus roles, and yet we see this multiplicity as an asset that further commits us to ensuring our roles are creative instead of proscriptive (Smith et al., 2021; Hall, 2022). Reciprocity within identification is paramount: identifying a unit's strengths and opportunities is key to providing the unit agency while offering tailored support and scaffolding quality assurance processes

appropriately.

Creativity

The language of quality assurance connotes systemic efforts, structural change, and a framework of checks and balances. There are templates that must be filled out and a companion guide to ensure those templates are filled out correctly, and yet, as educational support professionals we are passionate about the value of creativity within this framework, and as third space professionals we are well-positioned to demonstrate that there are always multiple correct pathways through this process. We can guide units into finding approaches that are authentic to their programmes and discipline and ensure that this—to paraphrase the language of the provincial Quality Council (Grass, 2010) — mandatory rigorous audit is also creative and reciprocal. We believe that rigor and creativity are not diametrically opposed, but instead can be complementary. In our experience credibility should also leverage creativity and playfulness to build trust.

In their discussion of trustworthiness, Little and Green state that “by acting in ways that demonstrate trustworthiness, developers foster trust, increasing the likelihood that colleagues will act on a developer’s knowledge and adopt new evidence-based practices or engage in calculated risks with a new pedagogy” (2022, pp.808). Their discussion of engaging in “calculated risks” aligns with our understanding of creativity, as we use that term to evoke ideas of innovation, play, and a focus on process as well as result. Creativity is not a new concept within educational development, and yet in the context of quality assurance, it is not always understood as foundational. It comes back to that fear of “getting it wrong,” especially in circumstances when the stakes feel so high, and the process is so new (Graham, 2012). The Ontario Quality Council was only established in 2010; how can you innovate when you are still learning how to regulate? How can a quality assurance process grounded on the principles of continuous improvement be valuable if it does not provide the opportunity for reflective thinking and writing? Moreover, how can we facilitate authentic engagement with the process and promote its value for meaningful continuous improvement without fostering creativity? This is where the value of third space professionals lies (Szekeres, 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Hall, 2022). Our hybrid orientation primes us to guide this work collaboratively, credibly, and creatively (Whitchurch, 2015).

Conclusion

The discourse surrounding the credibility of third space professionals reveals underlying issues of academic elitism and the need for greater recognition and support within educational frameworks. By acknowledging the significance of these roles and investing in their capacity, we can challenge the notion of hybridity as merely an austerity measure and instead recognise it as intrinsically valuable. Moreover, since quality assurance is an institutional requirement and a significant time commitment for units involved, it benefits everyone in higher education to ensure that it is a space that produces meaningful engagement and creative educational exploration. It is imperative, both individually and institutionally, to champion the third-space professionals in quality assurance roles and ensure they receive the resources they require to both lead programmes through successful audits *and* guide authentic continuous improvement.

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