The Concept of Quality: Does it Matter?

Mini-Course 5002
Lynn Barendsen and Wendy Fischman
2012 Project Zero Classroom
The Concept of Quality: Does it Matter?
Tuesday and Thursday
10:30 AM-1 PM

I. Welcome and Introduction

4 Essential Questions:
   1. What is quality?
   2. Why is quality important?
   3. Who decides what quality is?
   4. How can we encourage quality?

II. Quality Interview, Survey and Discussion

III. Research on Quality
 - background
 - findings

IV. Vignettes from “Quality Through The Ages”

V. Traveling Brainstorm and Discussion: Quality in the Classroom

VI. Wrap Up and Evaluation
Interview Questions:

1) What comes to mind when you hear the word “quality”?

2) Think about what you did yesterday. What first comes to mind when you think about a “quality experience” or “time well spent” during the past 24 hours?
   a) What comes to mind when you think about time wasted?
   b) What comes to mind when you think about letting time “pass”—time that was neither well spent or wasted?

3) In the context of your work, what does it mean for you to do work that is of excellent quality?
   a) Do you think that your definition of quality at work has changed throughout your work history? If so how? Why do you think it changed?
   b) How similar or dissimilar are your personal standards for quality work from those with whom you work?

4) The next three questions may sound somewhat similar. There may or may not be overlap between responses.
   a) What are 3 things you own that are of high quality? What is it about these three things-as a group-that makes them of high quality?
   b) What are 3 things you own that are personally meaningful to you? What is it about these three things-as a group-that makes them meaningful to you?
   c) What are the 3 most valuable things that you own? What is it about these three things-as a group-that makes them valuable?
Quality Survey

1)  
a. To me, quality is most important in terms of:  
   o the tangible objects that I buy/collect (e.g. clothing, electronics, photographs, etc.).
   o the services that I use (e.g. health care, restaurants, automotive maintenance, etc.).
   o how I use my time (e.g. in leisure activities, at work, with family and friends, etc.).  
b. What things would make you change—or what issues would you address—to make living in your community even better (i.e. to improve quality of life)?
   You may list up to three things.
   1. ________________________________________________________________
   2. ________________________________________________________________
   3. ________________________________________________________________

2)  
Everyone enjoys doing activities that they believe are worthwhile. Because people are different, activities that may feel like a good investment of time to one person may feel like a waste of time to someone else. The next two questions include a list of activities. Some of these activities may seem worthwhile to you personally— the types of activities you would choose to pursue if you had a period of unscheduled time. Other activities on the list may seem like a waste of time to you.

Please indicate the ONE activity that is closest to what would be time well spent for you—the activity you might pursue if you had a block of unscheduled time later today.
   o Being alone; the activity doesn’t really matter.
   o Doing volunteer service in my community.
   o Trying something new.
   o Educating myself/learning something new.
   o Spiritual/religious practice.
   o Attending a cultural event.
   o Utilizing technology for entertainment (e.g. using the internet, TV, playing video games, surfing the web).
   o Being with friends and/or family; the activity doesn’t really matter.
   o Communicating with friends (e.g. talking on the phone, writing letters, emailing, texting, etc.).
   o Pursuing a hobby or leisure activity.
   o Accomplishing routine tasks (e.g. housework, routine errands).
   o Working at my paid employment.
   o Being outdoors; the activity doesn’t really matter.
   o Other (please specify).

Think about the last twenty-four hours. Are there activities that you now think were a waste of time—time you realize you could have spent doing something more worthwhile?
   o Yes
   o No
3) Ideally, when reading a book I prefer to:
   o read a digital book.
   o read a tangible book.
   o I do not read books regularly.
   o listen to an audio book.

4) I prefer to read books this way because:
   o I enjoy the process of reading more.
   o it reflects my personality of values.
   o it is more efficient.
   o it is more convenient.

5) Ideally, when communicating appreciation to another person, I prefer to:
   o send an electronic or typewritten thank you.
   o I do not write thank you notes.
   o handwrite a thank you note.

6) I prefer to communicate my appreciation this way because:
   o I can think better.
   o the product is more attractive.
   o it is more convenient.
   o I enjoy the process of writing more this way.
   o it is more efficient.
   o it reflects more care/ it is more personal.
   o it reflects my personality or values.
   o Other (please specify).

7) Ideally, I prefer to enjoy visual and/or performing arts (music, theatre, film) by:
   o I do not enjoy visual and/or performing arts.
   o watching a televised cultural event or viewing a book/ electronic gallery at home.
   o attending an arts/ cultural event in person.

8) I prefer to enjoy art this way because:
   o I enjoy the process more.
   o the physical experience is better.
   o the emotional experience is better.
   o I want to patronize venues that support the arts.
   o it is more convenient.
   o I understand arts better this way.
   o Other (please specify).
9) a. What is one, tangible object that you own that is excellent, or “high quality”?

b. From the list below, please select the ONE reason that is MOST IMPORTANT to your explanation for why the object you identified is excellent, or “high quality”.
   o It enables me to something that I enjoy doing.
   o It keeps me connected to other people.
   o It has lasted – or will last- a long time.
   o It does what it is supposed to do.
   o It was expensive.
   o It is beautiful to look at.
   o It was given to me on a special occasion.
   o It has many features.
   o It represents something about who I am as a person.
   o It was given to me by someone important to me.
   o Other (please specify).

c. Please indicate the ONE reason that is LEAST IMPORTANT to your explanation for why the belonging you identified is excellent, or “high quality”.
   o It keeps me connected to other people.
   o It was given to me on a special occasion.
   o It enables me to something that I enjoy doing.
   o It has lasted – or will last- a long time.
   o It does what it is supposed to do.
   o It is beautiful to look at.
   o It was expensive.
   o It represents something about who I am as a person.
   o It has many features.
   o It was given to me by someone important to me.
   o Other (please specify).

d. Which of the following do think most influenced your opinions about what makes an object excellent?
   o My experiences in my family.
   o My experiences as a consumer.
   o My experiences in school.
   o My experiences as an employee
   o My experiences as a citizen.
   o Other (please specify).
e. Thinking about the context that you just identified (family, work, community, etc.), please check which of the following individuals has had a particularly strong influence on your opinions about what makes an object excellent in quality. You may select more than one response.
   o Community/organizers
   o Friends
   o My own children
   o None
   o Other people’s children
   o Parents
   o Political leaders
   o Religious leaders
   o Siblings
   o Spouse
   o Teachers/coaches
   o Work colleagues
   o Work supervisor
   o Other (please specify).

10) Most people have criteria they use to judge the quality of their own work, whether they are pursuing paid employment or leisure activities.
   a. Please indicate the ONE factor that BEST DESCRIBES what excellent work means to you.
      o Doing more than is required.
      o Working well with a team.
      o Maintaining a time schedule.
      o Having the right tools (technology, mechanical tools, paper products, etc.).
      o Being ethical.
      o Giving 100% effort.
      o Creating an error-free product.
      o Using quality materials.
      o Meeting standards set by a boss, client, or colleague.
      o Performing responsibilities that are meaningful.
      o Other (please specify)
b. Please indicate the ONE factor that LEAST EXPLAINS what excellent work means to you.
   o Having the right tools (technology, mechanical tools, paper products, etc.).
   o Performing responsibilities that are meaningful.
   o Doing more than is required.
   o Working well with a team.
   o Meeting standards set by a boss, client, or colleague.
   o Giving 100% effort.
   o Being ethical.
   o Using quality materials.
   o Maintaining a time schedule.
   o Creating an error-free product.
   o Other (please specify).

c. Which of the following best explains times when your work does not meet your personal
definition of excellent:
   o I don’t have the sufficient resources (other than time).
   o The task or project seems unimportant to me.
   o It is unclear what is expected of me.
   o I don’t have enough time.
   o I can only perform the task exactly as I have been told to do so by a supervisor or client.

d. In general technology...
   o Increases the quality of my work.
   o Detracts from the quality of my work.
Excellence in the Physical Sphere: Emergence of the Olympic Games

By most accounts, the ancient Olympic games began in 776 B.C. at a sanctuary called Olympia after Mt. Olympus—the highest mountain in Greece and the home of the Greek gods and goddesses. Origins of the event are disputed. Some believe that the first Olympics began as a celebration of a chariot ride in which Pelops won the hand of his bride. Others assert that the games were created by the Greek hero Hercules, following a victory in battle, as a means of honoring his father Zeus. Some contend that the Olympics symbolize one of Zeus’ own victories. Though these accounts differ, the common threads of competition, excellence, fairness, celebration, pride, and politics are woven through both the ancient and modern Olympic Games.

In ancient times, the Olympics were a festival involving all kinds of individuals who came together from different parts of the Greek world, accordingly representing different beliefs, traditions, and political views. Today the Olympics represent a positive form of nationalism—an opportunity for athletes to “put their home town on the map” and to express pride in their respective countries. Though athletes aspire to individual achievement, they behold victory for the homeland as supreme. In contrast to other national and international sporting leagues and competitions, money is not the ultimate reward. Instead, the desired prize is the recognition of excellence and superiority, important values that have spanned the globe across the generations.

Initially, the Olympics were created to transcend different worldviews. In ancient times the Olympics were viewed as a “truce,” which “was, in effect, an interim of civic and military neutrality in honor of Zeus, the supreme judge and arbiter and source of wisdom, a Pan-Hellenic gathering and renewal of cultural and blood ties among the Hellenic peoples from all parts of the civilized world, a peaceful interim ....”

In modern times, however, the Olympics have frequently served as a “symbolic struggle” among controversial and conflicting political views—such as socialism, democracy, and Nazism in the 1930s.

One of the biggest political statements was made during the 1980 Moscow games; in the interest of calling attention to human rights, the United States and other western countries boycotted the Olympics.

Since their inception, the Olympics have represented high ideals. Athletes competed as individuals (not as teams), thus embodying the Greek ideal of excellence, or *arête*. In ancient times, athletic training was a part of a student’s education. As with athletes of our times, if skill was detected at an early age, a student pursued an Olympic path, which included rigorous formal training and scrupulous attention to nutrition. Many of the early Olympian athletes maintained jobs throughout the training; if they won, these individuals quickly became career athletes, receiving money, meals, and leadership positions in the community.

Over time, one of the most important attributes of the Olympic Games has been the pureness of competition, the standard of excellence throughout, and the intolerance of cheating. In ancient times, *Hellanodikai*, the judges, were renowned for fairness and were specially trained to judge the competitions. Unethical behavior entailed consequences, including expulsion from the games, fines, and even whipping. Lore suggests that money paid in fines was used to make bronze statues of Zeus, which were placed on the road to the stadium. Descriptions of the offenses were inscribed on these statues as a way to remind people of the importance of skill, honesty, and fair competition.
Quality Discussion Questions

1. What does this vignette say about quality? How does it contribute to the definition of quality?

2. What are some of the tensions raised in the vignette? How do these tensions relate to our understanding of quality?

3. Does the concept of time play a role with understandings of quality in this vignette?
One of the most monumental inventions of recent decades is the personal wireless communication device, known as the “mobile phone.” Fashioned in 1973 by Martin Cooper, this device has evolved through many iterations of shrinking size, less weight, and increasingly sleek, and often fanciful design. Most handheld phones now weigh less than 3 ounces and have many more functions than just voice access. “Smart Phones” or handheld personal devices include access to the Internet, games, calendars, music, videos, and many other “applications”. In 2009, Apple reported that 500 million “apps” had been downloaded from the Internet, from various handheld devices, such as the iPhone, Droid, or Blackberry.

Cooper’s original intent for a mobile phone was freedom—allowing individuals to be at any location in the world and still be connected to others. Rather than being “tied down” to a car (even though it is mobile), an office, or a home, individuals can walk anywhere and while remaining in touch with others. In fact, today, there are more mobile phone users than wireline phone subscribers in the world. Even in Kenya, a developing country of Africa, the number of mobile phones has grown from one million to 6.5 million in the last five years (the number of landlines is approximately 300,000).

The mobile phone has influenced quality of life—specifically the social, political, and economic climate of many countries in which people live. Mobile phone applications enable people to leave a message, send money, take a picture and text (especially if prepaid time for talking has been exhausted). Perhaps unanticipated, these devices have the power to connect political activists and to impact the consciousness and even the activism of disadvantaged populations. In 2007, in the town of Kibera “Africa’s biggest slum with about 800,000 people living in streets that are effectively composed of sewage and old shoes,” such activism crystallized; individuals banded together to fight evictions by sitting in front of the bulldozers about to take over their land. Mobile phones are considered to have had significant roles in a number of political revolutions—successful and thwarted—in the Middle East and in the former Soviet Union. A community organizer commented on the effect of mobile phones,

2 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6242305.stm
“Now that we have information we don’t have to be dependent on patronage of the politicians—we can question them and be more independent.”

Though Martin Cooper still believes they are in their “infancy” nearly four decades years after their development, the mobile phone already had remarkable impact on the ways in which people around the planet lead their daily lives.

3 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6242305.stm
Food is necessary for life. The earliest humans centered their lives around the search for food; rituals highlighted prayer for fertile soil and fruitful hunting expeditions. For much of history, individuals spent most of their working hours hunting, fishing, gathering, planting or harvesting crops; when they could produce more food than they needed personally, they bartered food for other necessities, or, if they were fortunate, for luxuries. Today, food has also developed into a means of self-expression. Food is a passion, a hobby, and, for many, a profession. Today, our approach to food reflects our lifestyles and values, including a concern on the part of many with the ethics of what we consume.

Food movements arise for many reasons, including a concern with the environment and sustainability, health issues, or the desire for new or better tastes. Many movements focus on the quality of ingredients and the care with which they are prepared in order to produce a pleasurable eating experience. Today, busy schedules, demanding work hours, and a subsequent lack of time interfere with regular family meals. In 1986, in response to fast food chains, like McDonald’s or Burger King, the “slow food movement” started in Italy. This movement, which has since spread to over 100 countries, signifies heightened appreciation for the steps involved in preparing, eating, and savoring food thoroughly and thoughtfully. The debate over a fast food culture has also played out in a renewed focus on eating together and the significance of the family meal. Attention is now being given to the importance of meal time in terms of eating quality food, fostering civility in children, and engendering closeness within family.

Through the years, science has also played a part in food production as farmers strive to find the most efficient and productive ways to grow crops. The quest for aesthetically configured fruits and vegetables has inspired techniques such as genetic engineering and hormone treatments. In response to—and in suspicion of—genetic enhancements in food and animals, movements such as organic food, local food, vegetarianism and veganism have become popular. These movements reflect concern for animal rights, the impact on our health of consuming animal productions, and the possible hazards of consuming hormones and other introduced chemicals.
For many in the world, food shortage is also a pressing issue. Global initiatives focusing on sustainable farming and proper nutrition are essential if we are to feed the hungry properly. Surprisingly often, the problem is not the production of sufficient food per se, but rather the political will and means to bring the food to those in need. Once adequate quantities of food are available, a focus on the quality of the food, as well as the culinary experience, will become an option for all human beings.
Becoming absorbed in work or in a hobby can be an enjoyable experience. As proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, an experience of ‘flow’, occurs when one becomes so deeply immersed in a pursuit that one loses track of time, space, and the ambient surrounding. The combination of challenge and skill required to perform certain intricate tasks or accomplish difficult feats become rewarding to individuals. The positive benefits of flow, including heightened motivation, sustained engagement, clear-headedness, and increased capability, make such experiences valuable and sought after in both professional and personal endeavors.

Most of us spend much of our time engaged in work. While not all persons experience flow at their job, most of us hope to find a career where we can be both challenged and engaged by the work being done. Those fortunate enough to enjoy their jobs reap the benefits, feeling motivated and fulfilled. Once one becomes more than superficially engaged in an activity, there is motivation to do the activity well and to challenge oneself continually such motivation can be enthralling. By contrast, many tasks during the day are often necessary, but frequently not enjoyable, as they offer little challenge and yield few skills. These are not occasions for flow.

Outside of work, people find value in personal experiences in which they can find a physical or mental challenge, such as running a marathon or playing chess. These activities provide participants with the opportunity to perform at their best and work towards personal goals. Rock climbing, for instance, can become engrossing: it offers a climber the physical challenge of climbing and the mental focus on technique and precision in form, keeping the climber focused on the present with a clear goal in mind. Strategic games also offer high levels of engagement, as they often produce a full immersion in the moment, with a focus on tactics and moves needed to win. Chess players can sit for hours pondering an evenly matched pair of positions, oblivious to anything but the game. The physical and mental prowess required to perform well at such activities allow participants to fill their time purposefully and enjoyably.

One of the hallmarks about such “peak experiences” is that they are ever evolving; one’s skill is enhanced, the challenge is heightened, learning occurs, and the cycle can continue indefinitely, indeed, over the course of a lifetime. The motivated learner can continue to find new meaning and fulfillment from the activity; and the expert may also be able to share learning and pleasure with less experienced
individuals, inviting them to institute their own cycle of developing skills and meeting challenges. A special blessing of such ‘time well spent’ is that it is not exclusive in any sense; all who are willing to apply themselves have the opportunity to pursue experiences of flow.