

High standards or a high standard of standardness?

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Abstract

This paper explores the difference between *high standards* and a *high standard of standardness* of professional service provision in teacher-librarianship. That is to say, it explores the difference between a demonstrated deep commitment to 21st century learning (*high standards*) and demonstrated compliance with a pre-determined checklist of skills and capacities (*a high standard of standardness*). A case is made for maintaining scepticism about all schema for defining 'standards' at the same time that professionals should work for their advancement and improvement.

Educators of all stripes find themselves working within an increasingly regulated, system and accountability-driven education environment. The 'audit explosion' has brought with it new accountabilities and new demands for contributing to the flows of information on which the effective management of our organisations is increasingly dependent. This threatens the collapse of 'high standards' into a demand to provide evidence that risks to institutional performance have been avoided – the risk of declining standards, of wastage of resources. The implications that flow from this are that school libraries, like other educational service sectors, are under greater pressure than ever to consider cutting back on certain services and functions that are not directly 'auditable' by means of standard quality measures.

The argument advanced in this paper is that building and maintaining high professional standards is a more complex issue that involves, among other things, learning from the historical antecedents of such service provision. It is posited that the skills and dispositions relevant to the café and/or the coffee shop of old are as relevant to the professional standards of teacher-librarians as are teacherly and information management capacities. The paper concludes by suggesting that, through reconnecting with the capacities of successful café proprietors, it may be possible to inform in a more contextualised way our on-going debates about what counts as high standards of teacher-librarianship.

'The real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable but not quite.'

G.K.Chesterton

Introduction

I want, in this brief paper, to consider the difference between *high standards* and a *high standard of standardness*¹ of professional service provision. That is to say, I want to explore the difference between a demonstrated capacity to optimise 21st century learning through librarianship (*high standards*) and demonstrated compliance with a pre-determined checklist of the skills and capacities of a librarian (*a high standard of standardness*). While every profession needs a broad consensus around the nature of the professional services to be performed under its umbrella, the highest standard of professionalism is unlikely to fit, in the final analysis, into a one-size-fits-all tick box list of professional skills and capacities. Dot point lists of generic criteria do serve a clarifying purpose, but we need to guard against any unintended tendency to elevate mere compliance to the highest rank of performance. In the 21st century, it is the thoughtful innovator – one who is already thinking and doing creatively in response to the next wave of unprecedented challenges, who is most likely to exemplify high professional standards; and this will involve, among other

¹ This phrase was coined by educational scholar David Mulcahy, as cited in the article, *'Audit Culture and the Politics of Accountability: The price of bureaucratic peace'* (Brenneis, Shore and Wright, 2003).

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things, a capacity to ‘un-learn’ their profession, as well as to re-learn by means of experimentation and welcoming the instructive complications of error. It is for this reason that I begin from a position of scepticism about all schema for defining ‘standards’, subjecting them always to ruthless scrutiny at the same time that we work for their advancement and improvement.

The very significant gap between *high standards* and a *high standard of standardness* is one which G.K. Chesterton fingered over a century ago. In declaring that most of our potential troubles are “nearly reasonable”, Chesterton drew attention to the gap that exists between any rational scheme we might devise for improving our practice, and the nature of human being itself. “Life”, said Chesterton, “is not an illogicality, but it is a trap for logicians” (Chesterton, 1974, p.149). Put another way, the gap between what is *reasonable* and *nearly reasonable* in determining standards of professional service provision is, following Chesterton, particularly noteworthy at a time when hyper-rational systems of audit and accountability are expected to solve every potential trouble, real or imagined (Strathern, 1997; 2000).

Performance-driven systems of audit and accountability now reach into almost every sphere of human activity, and this is so despite the inadequacy of these totally reasonable systems when it comes to solving our organisational and service provision dilemmas. We use performance measures to calculate future targets, in full anticipation that tomorrow’s productivity measures will look like today’s. And we do so despite the fact that the data we collect about the past are never fully up to the task of predicting the future, no matter how hard we try to map variables and take account of divergent trends and discontinuities (see Bernstein, 1998). Performance management, risk management, quality assurance – all these organisational systems involve data collection and information flow dedicated to making our professional work more visible and calculable, and this is so for better and worse.

Those of us who remember working as educators in the fifties and sixties will know that our daily routines at that time were relatively free from the forensic scrutiny of performance measures. This meant, among other things, that arbitrariness and idiosyncrasy flourished, at the same time that we educators spent much more of our time educating, unencumbered by relentless demands for feedback to augment a flow of information about institution-wide quality and performance. Eccentrics, enthusiasts, nasties and nurturers of all sorts made up the educational ranks. Long-term library staff could be generous or Genghis, and all points in between. At one school where I was employed, the head librarian explained to me on the first day that “To err was human; to forgive was not library policy” – and she meant it!

We have both lost and gained in the process of bringing the forensic light of audit to bear on educational service provision. We have gained in terms of our capacity to guard against declining standards, waste of resources and the negative effects of arbitrary, abusive or idiosyncratic conduct. Yet we have also lost, in as much as we have failed to note the flaw in the premise that totally reasonable systems, properly designed and administered, can and will deliver quality. So busy have we become with making our professional capacities visible and calculable that we have had little time to remember or value the lessons of the past, the antecedents to our notions of what counts as professionalism.

History lessons

One of the lessons of the past, it needs to be said, is that the establishment of standards – of shared understandings of what is acceptable, even laudable, as social practice - is a key marker of a more enlightened way of living, learning and earning. Few of us could imagine living at a time when ‘standard measures’ did not exist - where a pound of vegetables in one location was not necessarily equal in weight to a pound of vegetables in a region nearby, when few rules existed to curb the arbitrariness and excess in the exercise of power, when only the brave or foolhardy ventured more than a few kilometres from their place of birth, where there were few places safe from savagery and disorder. Once standards of social and economic conduct were agreed, it was possible for society itself to wield the carrot-shaped stick of reward and punishment, making it possible to imagine with at least a bit more certainty what tomorrow might hold, and therefore what the wisest course of action might be. Put simply, we all benefit from the achievement of a social consensus around ‘standard practice’ and even more from consensus around ‘high standards’ of practice.

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It has only been in relatively recent historical times, however, that we have paid much attention to standards as they apply to managing a learning environment. It was early in the nineteenth century that Joseph Lancaster published his pioneering work, *Hints and Directions for Building, Fitting Up, and Arranging School Rooms*. The manuscript was a blueprint for the sort of built environment that he considered would be most conducive to ‘mutual education’, the means by which governments would educate large numbers of children all at the same time. Lancaster’s work ignited a widespread debate that continued throughout the nineteenth century about the optimal standards for schools as educational sites. By the second half of the nineteenth century, British schools were regulated by legislation that locked in the proper dimensions of school buildings, the jobs to be performed in schools and the rules of hygiene to be enforced in schools.

Meanwhile, and for some time previous to this, the coffee house had been emerging in Britain as an important ‘home away from home’ for the aspirational and the well-to-do alike. An antecedent to the more modern café, the coffee house provided a convivial space, a place of sociability, learning and public display where social intermingling transcended class barriers – where baronets shared with boot-makers the news and gossip of the day. The space of the coffee house marked a borderland between spheres of production and of leisure, with daily visits being, for British men (customers were exclusively male), a vital means of establishing a social place in venture capitalism, colonial expansion and small-scale manufacturing. It was a place where men came to learn whatever they wanted to and in whatever way they chose - to share conversation, newspapers, coffee and scandal, to read and to be read to if they were illiterate. Coffee houses were spaces for opinion-making and opinion-sharing, operating as sites of scientific demonstration (Isaac Newton’s famous dissection of a dolphin caught in the Thames took place in a coffee house) and for dissemination of advertising and employment opportunities, meanwhile being warm and well-lit spaces inviting the customers to relax and linger as well as learn:

Ye citizens, gentlemen, lawyers and squires,
Who summer and winter surround our great fires,
Ye quidnuncs! who frequently come into Pue's,
To live upon politicks, coffee, and news. (Gilbert, 1978)

Across the channel in Paris, the café had become an even livelier social hub, an exciting place for discussions of life, art, and politics, a home not just for critiques and the fashionable set, but also for émigrés and intellectuals. Such cafés continued to provide a space for the cultural and political boom of the 19th and early 20th centuries – the politics of Lenin, the art of the Impressionists, the philosophy of Sartre and the literature of Hemingway.

The rise of ‘standards’

In this century educators have come increasingly to value, at least in theory, the relentlessly curious disposition to learn, understand and critique that marked the appeal the coffee shop or the café. At the same time that we celebrate the desirability of social and self-managed learning, however, we also insist on tying the funding of learning to outcomes that can be measured by pre-determined standards. These standards are generally linked to government-approved outcomes such as better employability skills, wider international markets, and improvements in literacy, numeracy and citizenship, as defined within state-sanctioned policy.

Governments world-wide have for some time now, according to David Corson, been “saddling [educational]... systems with an extravagant array of tests and assessments, so much so that some warn against the arrival of the ‘evaluative state’ that will be tied in all respects to a doctrine of competition, measurable results, and efficiency” (Corson, 2002, p.7). While I am perhaps more sanguine than Corson about the entirely pernicious effects of an evaluative State, I do acknowledge the downside of the growing propensity to fix on performance data (including, in Australia, NAPLAN and MySchool) that can be standardised in order to allow for intra-state, national and international comparisons. Anecdotal evidence from schools indicates that already standardised testing regimes are serving to narrow the scope of what counts as valuable learning, as teachers feel themselves constrained to maximise student performance on these standardised tests at the risk of jettisoning other valuable learning experiences. A decade ago, studies

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by Sharon Gewirtz (1999) in the United Kingdom and Robert Lingard et al (2002) in Australia revealed a demonstrated trend to narrower curriculum, in which critical, autonomous and creative thinking skills were valued only in so far as they could be seen to contribute to productivity as measured by the school's aggregate examination performance. If we are to accept the evidence these scholars provide for making such a claim, then it could be argued that, in the push to accountability and pull to curiosity, it is the former imperative that tends to overwhelm the latter. According to Ranson (2003), accountability is no longer "merely an important instrument or component within the system", but "constitutes the system itself" (p. 459). In other words, educational professionals are not alone in having to respond to the demands of an audit culture's all-embracing mechanisms for quantifying their quality.

Unfortunately such demands for quantification of our quality can involve us in doing time-consuming work that we value little and enjoy less. Gerard Lum is scathing about the effects of a standardising work culture at its worst:

To the extent that educators and assessors succeed in their efforts they do so in spite of rather than because of these [standardising] arrangements. Their success serves to conceal what is perhaps the real catastrophe of so-called competence-based education and training: the sheer waste of effort and resources as educators struggle to compensate for the inadequacies of official arrangements by engaging in a tacit, parallel enterprise – all the while being compelled to contort and misrepresent their efforts to pay lip-service to official procedures. (Lum, 2009: 173)

Thus the production of evidence of 'true professionalism' may require us to strike some rather odd choreographies, linguistic and otherwise. If, for example, we can only make a case for being 'innovative' through the logic of digital technology uptake, then an exemplar of 'empty armpit' pedagogy, no matter how exciting it may be for the participants, cannot count. Most performance standards only work within a cultural logic that privileges some observable activities and outcomes over others that may be equally valuable or even more so. The fact that thinking, for example, does not necessarily look like anything – indeed, may look the same as sleeping – makes it very difficult to make a performance-based claim to more thoughtfulness in oneself and/or others. Thinking has to look like something and to result in something. This point is well illustrated in Guy Claxton's memory of a teacher who caught him apparently staring into space – "What are you doing, Claxton?" he asked. "Thinking sir," was Guy's reply. "Well, stop that immediately and get back to your work!"

Professional expertise

Whether we agree with Lum's negative assessment of contemporary arrangements for developing and maintaining professional standards in education, there is no doubt that the push to quantify standards makes for tensions around the attention professional educators ought to give to the knowledge they need as 'expert' managers of students and systems, and what attention they should give to local, disciplinary-specific or 'craft' knowledge. It is not that they are being required to displace the latter altogether, but they now are being required to understand it as only part of a much larger domain of "professional [academic] expertise". Ericson and Haggerty (1997) elaborate:

[P]rofessionals obviously have 'know-how', [but] their 'know-how' does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p. 104)

It follows that, to be a professional expert is to be 'plugged into' to the burgeoning systems of accountability that are now being used to 'diagnose, classify and treat' students, staff and other 'stakeholders'. The "audit explosion" (Strathern, 1997) that we have seen in the last three decades requires all workers within any risk-managed organisation to defend against systemic arbitrariness, by applying mechanisms designed to ensure organisational precision for coping with (appropriate) social imprecision. The logic here, as anthropologist Marilyn Strathern understands it, is that systems of management need to be uniform because individuals are

not, nor are likely to be. This logic of procedural equity runs counter to the idea that is espoused in some quarters that audit cultures are *intentionally* depersonalising. While the audit explosion may have depersonalising *effects*, the logic of the intensive bureaucratic monitoring that characterises audit culture is *not* ‘one-size-fits-all’ in terms of the individuals who are its ‘products’. What is standard is the particular model for measuring organisational performance. In this way it is possible to argue that individual differences are being catered for. This can be argued at the same time that any claims a particular public or private institution may make are able to be more precisely monitored and justified by way of league tables and similar comparative data systems. Thus each workplace can demonstrate or otherwise its accountability for its spending against established benchmarks, regardless of whether or not that funding derives from the public purse.

What all this means, in simple terms, is that ‘professional standards’ are necessarily constituted, for better and worse, within the cultural logic of “risk society” (Beck, 1992). There is no alternative logic. Thus professional standards are always at risk of being cut down to ‘high standards of standardisation’ if and when the profession is not actively engaged in debates about standards as social, moral, ethical, and pedagogical, not merely competencies to be inculcated and observed through generic templates for calculating proficiency levels. The quest for professional standards, then, can never guarantee improvements in the quality of what we do, because *standards both enable and constrain*. It is for this reason that, as educators, we do well to maintain our scepticism about standards at the same time that we cautiously invest in their articulation in this historical moment.

Beyond standardness

If we need not feel constrained to choose either *for* or *against* standards, how then might we sustain our capacity to think about them in ways that transcend the cultural logic of audit? I suggest, following on from my discussion of the importance of the coffee house/café in the history of lifelong learning, that it may be more fruitful to consider what it means to *working optimally at the cultural intersection of both the school and the café* - in other words, to imagine standards of service provision that bring together two powerful social traditions - the mandated, foundational education and moral training of the school, and the self-selected, sociable, bespoke learning of the café. Both are implicated in the pursuit of *lifelong learning* as the key disposition for successful living and earning. And it is, arguably, in the affordances of ‘quality’ libraries where the synthesis of these two traditions is most evident.

If, as I have posited above, the antecedents of excellent libraries can be traced to the best traditions of the school and the coffee house or café, then the standards that apply to the provision of library services ought to be reflected, at least in some respects, in their framing. We might reasonably expect to see the standards of the accomplished 21st century teacher mirrored in teacher-librarian standards, but what aspects of successful café proprietorship might be relevant to augment those of the traditional in-school educator?

We could begin by noting that the contemporary café is not necessarily the place to look for evidence of successful café proprietorship in terms of lifelong learning services. According to Singapore sociologist Daniel Goh, the sort of coffee shop culture that attracted the lifelong learner of past times is rarely in evidence today, even in cosmopolitan cities. It is much more likely to be found, he argues, in cyberspace, in sites where the public sphere, as a virtual rather than a physical space, is beyond the reach of government, media and other mechanisms of civil social control. Goh has this to say in relation to his own Singapore context:

Singapore cyberspace is bursting through [governmental]... controls and becoming a virtual public sphere... akin to “coffee shops” in Western Europe where the cognoscenti in the 18th century gathered to debate political ideas.... These coffee shops were instrumental in disseminating the ideas which would ultimately unseat the monarchical system of rule.... [This] is driven by a lack of such space in the real world. (Goh, quoted in Chang, 2010, p. A36)

Goh moves on to stress the “fearlessness” and “vibrancy” of the debates that are enabled by the Internet, as distinct from the constrained, even “comatose” discourse that has come to characterise regulated social spaces, including the discursive spaces within educational institutions (ibid). By implication, we might look to successful on-line ‘ning’² co-ordinators for ways of characterising ‘high standards’ of virtual service provision in this century. I suggest however, given the embryonic nature of many of these virtual cafes, it may be more useful to study historical accounts of accomplished café proprietors to characterise the service standards that are relevant to lifelong learning in contemporary times.

Studies of the proprietors of the earliest cafés and coffee houses make it apparent that such individuals were multi-skilled and engaging characters as well as smart and capable entrepreneurs. For example Richard Pue, proprietor of one of Dublin’s most famous 17th century coffee houses, was formerly a bookseller and newspaper proprietor, and also known to be “a witty and ingenious man, [who] makes the best coffee in Dublin, and.. very civil and obliging to all his customers; of an open and generous nature; [and with] a peculiar knack at bantering, mak[ing] rhymes to any thing” (Dunton, 1699). A willingness to seek far and wide for fresh and newsworthy items was likewise a mark of the enterprising and successful café proprietor. In 1702 coffee house owner Francis Dickson regularly printed and distributed his newspaper, *The Dublin Intelligence*, from his coffee house, providing up-to-date news from as far away as Paris, Harlem and Antwerp. This says much about the degree of alignment between his clients’ lifelong learning interests and his capacity to access and deliver novel and exotic information in a timely way. Many such owners played a lively role as social brokers, with their cafes providing additional services like those of advertising, employment and brokering agencies.

Conclusion

Such depictions of successful proprietors as those above are a useful backdrop against which to consider the current ASLA/ALIA ‘Standards of professional excellence for teacher librarians’. According to the standards document, the professional work of teacher librarians to which such standards of excellence apply is the activity directed to “support[ing] and implement[ing] the vision of their school communities through advocating and building effective library and information services and programs that contribute to the development of lifelong learners” (Standards of professional excellence for teacher-librarians, ASLA, p.1). My point here is that ‘high standards’ of teacher-librarianship ought to include but also transcend those of the professional teacher, not simply by way of including the capacity to access and utilise the most relevant technologies and information systems, but also because the library as a public space serving the interests of self-directed learners, has as much in common with the coffee houses and cafés of the past as it has with the school.

To conclude, I concur with the ASLA document that teacher-librarians are “uniquely qualified” within the broad fields of education and librarianship, because they combine “curriculum knowledge and pedagogy” with “library and information management knowledge and skills”, as long as the skills being alluded to are broad and deep enough to embrace those rich traditions for lifelong learning service provision in former times outside the school. In reconnecting with the capacities of ‘quality’ café proprietors, while also looking to the designers of ‘quality’ learning in virtual spaces, it becomes possible to articulate in a more informed and thoughtful way what ought to count as a high standard of teacher-librarianship. And in so doing, the chances that ‘high standards’ will be confused with ‘a high standard of standardness’ are very slim indeed.

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² A ning is an online platform that allows people with common interests create a customised social network. Its dynamics are similar to meeting a small group of selected friends in a shared and convivial social space like a cafe. © 2010 IASL, SLAQ and therein by the authors. *Diversity Challenge Resilience: School Libraries in Action* Proceedings of the 12th Biennial School Library Association of Queensland, the 39th International Association of School Librarianship Annual Conference incorporating the 14th International Forum on Research in School Librarianship, Brisbane QLD Australia, 27 September – 1 October 2010.

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