The “E” - Empowering Learners: Myths and Realities in Learner-Orientated eLearning Quality

Dr. Ulf-Daniel Ehlers
University of Duisburg-Essen

Summary
The article describes the concept of learner-orientated quality development. Learner quality concepts are introduced as the reference point for negotiation processes between the stakeholders in a quality development process.

The idea is that learner-orientated quality development is a necessity rather than an option if quality development is aimed at having an impact on the learning process. Quality development always has to be a connection of processes and procedures with values and normative decisions. Every facilitator, guiding a group of learners, needs a normative decision concept, such as a didactical theory, to have a sound basis for his or her activities. Quality development, which is relevant for educational processes, can therefore be described as the sum of all activities and efforts carried out in order to improve the learning process.

The emphasis of the educational process indicates at this point already that it is not possible to certify such a learning process orientated quality. It can be perceived only when the actual educational process takes place and is always a co-production between the learner and the learning environment. In recent quality debates, it is an oft-made mistake to assess educational environments isolated from the educational processes and not to take into account the target groups and other stakeholders within the environment. Since quality is not a given, stable characteristic of an educational environment but evolves only from the relation between the learner and the learning environment, quality can be perceived and assessed only in the actual context. Also, there is no means of defining quality criteria, which define quality apart from a concrete educational context.

As a consequence, quality development has to be seen as a process of negotiation in which all stakeholders need to participate. The aim of such a participative model for quality development is to define the values and objectives of the learning process together among the stakeholders. Such an active participation of learners will play an important role in future quality development systems. The learners have an active role in these concepts and need to be aware of their personal proposals and demands. In a form of self-management of their own educational biographies, they have to identify necessary characteristics that learning scenarios have to meet in order to enter into a successful educational process. Such participation processes require better information, transparency and counselling on the part of eLearning providers.

At the same time, learners have to be aware that their own responsibility for quality development rises, as they themselves are viewed as quality experts in the learning process.

Keywords: Learner Orientation, Participation, Empowerment, Learner-Centred Quality Research

1. Learner Orientation - a reality in the European Quality Debate

It has always been the dream of researchers and developers of e-learning systems to build a system which automatically takes into account all factors relevant to a high quality learning experience. At the same time the reality of today’s e-learning proves different. Twigg (2001) puts the finger on it by pointing out: „All too frequently, even innovative institutions fall back on a one-fits-all approach [...] forgetting that students are different and have different needs“ (Twigg 2001 in Schulmeister 2004). It is this field in which the debate of a learner related quality development is set.

Why is a learner oriented approach important at all? Schulmeister (2004) reports findings which show that the diversity and the differences - in motivation and anxiety - amongst students,¹ are highly influential on learning processes and outcomes. These differences are most likely rooted in different experiences, attitudes, and approaches towards learning. He concludes that “disregarding the diversity of students may result in failure.” (ibid.: 2). Regarding learning styles and cognition he emphasizes the importance to treat...
students as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group (ibid: 3) and argues that one of the most severe errors made in e-learning today, is the neglect of the diversity of students and the choice of a learning model that does not allow differentiation and learner oriented learning.

However, learner orientation, on the other hand, is not meant to base e-learning-arrangements purely on learner satisfaction and learners’ wishes and preferences - apparently there is no connection between satisfaction scores and learning outcomes (Sloan-C 2003). At the same time the number of variables of student diversity and their interactions is too high, fitting teaching methods to learning methods has no sound basis in research and there is no theory telling us which instructional methods are most suitable for which individual attitudes. Also, the gap between theoretical assumptions and pragmatic decisions when designing learning environments and when teaching, cannot be bridged by simple deduction, but is subject to norms and value judgments (ibid.) in the learning and also in the teaching situation.

The field of learner oriented quality development is still an open debate. So far, it is unclear in which learner variables/characteristics have which impact on learning. From a scientific point of view, the concept of learner orientation therefore remains in the dark. Quality certificates claiming organisations compliance to learners’ requirements have to be aware of that, and have to show that this is not rooted only in trendy debates.

Despite the educational reality and the uncertainty of how the concept of learner orientation can be put into practice, a close look at the European educational debate reveals that Europe is completely learner oriented in its educational philosophy. All official policy documents follow a modern constructive rhetoric and take on the leitmotiv of a competent acting individual, developing skills and competencies in a self-organised manner for the active participation in the “knowledge society”.2 For the sector of higher education this can be seen in the Bologna declaration (EC 1999), for the field of vocational education and training this can be derived from the Copenhagen declaration (EC 2002) and for schools this is discussed in all European countries after the PISA results hit the ground.

It is the expressed goal also in most of today’s mission statements and educational philosophies of professional staff working in the educational field to put the learner in the centre of attention, resp. in the drivers seat. No actor in the field of education, be it on the policy level, the administrative level, in the field of pedagogical practice as well as in educational science is taken seriously in the debate anymore, when failing to mention this point as the basic principal of the presented activity or concept. However - there are as many opinions as to what learner orientation actually is, as there are stakeholders promoting it. It is neither clear what learner orientation exactly means, how it can be put in practice and thus if it is taken as the basis of educational offers often remains unclear. Learner orientation can be seen a one myth of educational reality today, often quoted and less achieved.3 The article aims at bringing light into the debate. Three questions are focussed on:

1. What is learner oriented quality development and which theoretical implications are suitable to ground the debate newly?
2. What are reasons in literature and educational reality to follow the model of learner orientation in the quality debate rather than to be provider centred or technology centred?
3. How can learner orientation in quality development be achieved in a participative way?

2. Learner Oriented Quality Development: Impact on the Learning Process

There is no theory for “educational quality” so far,4 and thus no theoretical definition of the concept learner oriented quality. However, there are theoretical approaches to the question what successful learning is. It is useful to have a look at these concepts in order to be able to define the topic of learner oriented quality in a more concise way. The following account of a subjective learning theory allows a concise description of aspects and factors of learner oriented quality development.

2.1 What is Learner Orientation in E-Learning? A Definition Attempt

Klaus Holzkamp’s subject-scientific approach to learning (Holzkamp 1993) emphasizes that learning from a subjective point of view is not considered enough in previous learning theories. He concludes that the learner is not enough represented as a self-directed individual in learning theoretical approaches so far. According to his opinion, behaviouristic and cognitivistic approaches view learning as an externally controlled process, and that learning in traditional learning theory is not viewed from a learners subjective perspective (ibid: 14). It is obvious that this is also the reason for the lack of theories elaborating the idea of quality for learning from a subjective point of view.

According to Holzkamp, learning activities are mostly conceptualised as an impertinence for the learning subject - and learning and teaching are seen as directly dependant on each other. Consequently, learning takes place best if a teacher supplies learning activities and materials and/or the curriculum is institutionally organised. In
such approaches it is theoretically not explainable why an individual should learn out of ones own motivation and will. The perspective of the learning subject is systematically denied.

Holzkamp suggests a different approach. He views learning from the subjective point of view of the individual learner: Accordingly humans make their world accessible in an intentional way and acquire it from their own perspective. Reality is interpreted from their own point of view against the background of their experiences and intentions (ibid: 21). Subject form a "centre of intention" and experience others as well as "centres of intention" with their own perspective-related viewpoint. From this point of view, the world is interpreted as significantly and meaningful. These meanings are turned into „propositions for actions“ on which activities and decisions are based (ibid: 26).

"Learning", in his approach, is represented as "action which differentiates itself from other actions by its goal to extend ones own control possibilities" (ibid.).

At this point the parallels between a subjective theory of learning and quality development from a learners’ perspective becomes obvious: if learning takes place and is judged against individual propositions then also the assessment of the quality of a learning process takes place against the background of these propositions. It can be assumed that these propositions determine the individual learners’ (quality) requirements because they determine the demands for learning to realise the propositions. If learners have the possibility to assess a learning situation - in our case an e-learning-arrangement - they will do this against the background of their individual propositions, e.g. the intention to extend their competences in a certain field.

Since it can be assumed as safe that the propositions of learners are heterogeneous - individually different - quality development according to the principal „one for all“ does not seem to be feasible anymore.

To define a learner oriented quality concept means therefore to take the learners motivation, cognitive and personal situation/ context as the basis for the assessment of learning scenarios - and not any ‘objective’/ external criteria. Objectivity in this sense has no relevance for learning quality, because learning is a process deeply rooted in the a given situation/ context and the requirements and propositions of the learning individual.5

The problem at this point is an economical one: If learner oriented quality is defined in this way, then a variety of learning scenarios for the same course might be needed to fulfil the divers demands of learners individual learning propositions. How can this be done in a realistic way? Today there is no answer to this question. It is the challenge of quality research to find methods and ways how to take the learner’s requirements as a starting point for the design and provision of learning scenarios.

Schulmeister (2004) argues here in the direction of open learning environments (OLEs) which allow learners to explore their own learning path - and thus gain an individualised learning experience according to their individual demands.

Of course it can be argued that learning is not always taking place on basis of free individual chosen propositions but also in "forced", prescribed compulsory environments (e.g. in schools). The assessment of learning arrangements would then also take place on basis of not of individual propositions but rather of externally defined propositions, because the objectives are defined from the outside. Holzkamp (2003) takes this into account and differentiates between two kinds of learning: defensive learning and expansive learning. Defensive learning is a learning mode which takes place under the threat of sanctions. Under the threat of sanctions learning can be pretended or it comes to defensive learning. That means that the learner then tries to overcome the given problem through learning but tries to get it accomplished with as little effort as possible.

For the definition of a subjective quality concept, on the contrary, the concept of expansive learning is more suitable. Expansive learning start with a perception of a discrepancy between what I would like to do and what I am able to do. Due to individual propositions it appears meaningful to extend the control possibilities in order to master a specific task or action. Thus an interest in learning develops. The learner perceives his/her current abilities as being not sufficient for the current task. This perception of self inadequacy is called ‘experience of discrepancy’. Learning is not initiated by instructors in this case. Learning is initiated because a current learning object evolves from a potential learning object due to an experience of discrepancy. This releases an ‘emotional condition of inadequacy’ (Holzkamp 1993:214). Such an experience is the basis for learning motivation. In order to evolve into expressive learning, the learner must anticipate that the ‘extension of control’ is attainable through learning. If the necessary learning effort is appropriate, it is reasonable to learn expansively in order to solve the problem. According to this thesis, namely that each person acts on reasonable basis, learning follows as a necessity. The willingness to accept adversities and even setbacks is higher than with defensive learning. Expansive learning is to this extent more effective than defensive learning.

As a basis for learner oriented quality approaches and strategies the subject-scientific approach to learning appears to be more suitable than objective assumptions because it can be assumed
as safe that the motivation and personal situation for learning is highly heterogeneous, especially in adult learning. On basis of Holzkamp’s theoretical approach, learning is thus a process which is rooted in subjective motives and in each individuals context. A learner oriented quality concept has to take this into account for the definition of quality.

A look at today’s concept of teaching reveals the consequences which a learner oriented quality concept points at: It is widely believed that there is a direct connection between good teaching and good learning. However, Siebert (1985) points out that teaching aims can be abused if they include the idea that learning can be completely planned, that learning processes are determinable by instructors, and that learning results are quantifiable (ibid: 67). Holzkamp (1993) disagrees with this "fiction of administrative plannability" of learning processes as well. It is denied in this viewpoint that subjective reasons could motivate learning and learning is thus reduced to ‘Teaching equals Learning’. This Fallacy of Teaching=Learning holds that one hour of teaching would have the effect of one hour of learning (ibid: 397). This idea ignores subjective interests of learning. Learning output must be planable. The initiation of expansive, and therefore more effective, learning however, is subject to the coincidence of experiences of discrepancy and school can not want to promote expansive learning.

A learner oriented quality concept thus means to take into account that the assessment of learning environments takes pace on basis of individual propositions. This means from a learners point of view quality of e-learning would be a judgement of how suitable an e-learning-environment is designed to help them overcome their personal experience of discrepancy through learning.

Here, a paradox can be noted: If a learning scenario is provided only according to the wishes a learner has than - it can be argued - it is not possible for the learner to go beyond the borders of what he knows so far - to develop beyond his limitations. This is one main question of today’s pedagogical practice which has remained unanswered so far - empirically and theoretically: How can a learner be guided in his/her self-development process, resp. self-guided learning process, by external guidance? (Can you educate someone to freedom?) It is the well-known change of the role of a teacher as “sage on the stage” to the “guide by the side” which is needed, to accomplish this challenge, and which is addresses inmost of the modern constructivist rhetoric. Teachers in this understanding take on the role of facilitators. It demands for a pedagogical model which allows the learner to first develop his/her own questions and then develops solutions him-/herself in an exploratory manner (the connection to Schulmeister (2004) and his concept of Open Learning Environments is as well suitable here).

The relation between instruction and construction remains unclear in today’s pedagogical practice and is everyday filed by pragmatic activities of teachers in schools and universities. However it remains unclear how the two - instruction/ teaching and construction/ learning - can form an alliance. Mandl and Reinmann-Rothemeier (1995) point out that construction and instruction can not be realised according to the “all or nothing” principle. Learning requires always motivation, interest and activity on the learners side. Learning is thus always constructive and is has to be the utmost goal of every teaching to allow and stimulate construction processes for learners. On the other hand learning can be improved through the “guide by the side”. Mandl and Reinmann-Rothemeier emphasize therefore that learning is also interactively and that teaching has the central task to support learners and to help them with instruction (Mandl/ Reinmann-Rothmeier 1995: 52, Wellenreuther 2004: 69).

Taking into account the subjective theory of learning from Holzkamp and the paradox of instruction and construction, a learner oriented quality concept can be described as follows: Learner oriented quality development means to take the personal, mental situation as well as the learners propositions as the reference point for the decision which have to be made in the design and delivery process for e-learning-environments. It includes enabling learners to have discrepancy experiences and to guide learners (instructional component) in their own construction processes (construction component).

### 2.2 Four Plus one Reason for Learner Orientation

**Why is a learner oriented quality concept in today’s quality debate important?** The discussion going on around education in Europe reveals a discrepancy between a post-modern, constructivist and learner-oriented rhetoric on the one hand, and the reality of e-learning delivery on the other hand. However, the debate about the relevance of learner orientation is not only a myth but good reasons can be identified which make learner orientation in the quality debate a necessity rather than an option. There are four good reasons for learner orientation which can be identified from the debate: (1) Economic Developments, (2) Pedagogical Concepts, (3) Development of Society, (4) E-learning-related.

A fifth reason for learner orientation is the notion of co-production of the learning process between the learner and the learning environment (resources, teachers, materials, other learners, goals/ objectives, curriculum, social learning context, etc.). It can be seen as a general concept which in the sector of education and social services (e.g. the health sector) in general can be observed as...
more and more important. It goes beyond the pure notion of customer or consumer orientation. In fact the term “customer” and “consumer” do not describe the active participation requirement in a co-produced educational process. Fendt (2000) uses the analogy of persons buying a car. To transfer the concept of co-production from the educational field to the ‘market’ terminology would mean that before buying it, they would have to help produce it, and then afterwards the quality would be highly varying.

The ‘quality’ of person-related social services is understood as a social relationship, i.e. it cannot be unilaterally defined and validated, but is seen as a result of negotiation and compromise of those involved in the service process (Ehlers 2003). Due to their different positions, those involved in the process - users, professionals, management/ organisation and government/ society - have divergent criteria with regard to the ‘quality’ of services. What is defined as “good” quality is the result of disputes based on differing interests in the course of a negotiation process. From a service-theoretical perspective a new orientation is increasingly discernible, which is also reflected in further education: the ‘addressees’ of social services - i. e. the learners - are seen as co-producers, who use these services as part of their respective strategies for coping with life (cf. 2004, Pollitt 1998). Therefore the lasting practical value of services for the user is a highly important quality criterion in the service process. Applied to the education sector, this would refer to the practical value of the acquired knowledge, skills and competences.

The concept of co-production strengthens the influence of the learner for the definition of quality in education. In addition to that Gnäh (1998, 1999) states four more reasons which lead to a higher responsibility in the definition and negotiation process on quality in education.

1. Economic: An increase in the personal financial contribution of learners is anticipated, either directly, by financing private further training measures, or indirectly, by sacrificing spare-time to take part in company organised advanced training or further education.

2. Pedagogically and didactically, this finds expression in less instructional-based and more experience-based pedagogy.

3. On a social level: One reason for this development is the evolution of a knowledge society.

4. E-learning: A fourth reason for increasing learner responsibility in defining quality in e-learning lies in the special features of e-learning itself (for a detailed account see Baumgartner 1997). The special features of networked learning (with regard to access, needs structure and starting situation) are capable of providing individualised (in the sense of “tailored”, not in the sense of “isolated”) learning scenarios.

Quality development always means to negotiate values and to apply them to educational processes. For a learner oriented quality approach this means to find out learners subjective quality concepts, their requirements, personal contexts in order to take these as a starting point for quality development. It has to be emphasized again that this is not meant to plainly “do as learners wish”. It is rather important to take into account their motivational situation, their learning biographical experiences, their preferred learning mode for e-learning, to base courses on their pre-knowledge, to name only a few factors. The greatest misunderstanding with learner-orientation is to forget the notion of co-production which emphasizes to involve all factors relevant for a learning environment, as there are the curriculum, the learning goals or the physical or social learning environment. A learner orientation thus means to take the learners situation, references and knowledge about his or her situation as the reference point for the didactical, technological and other organisational decisions when designing a learning environment - but not the only guideline.

3. Agenda for Learner Oriented Quality Development in E-Learning

One crucial question for a learner oriented provision of e-learning-scenarios is, how subjective approaches to learning and subjective quality concepts can be identified, and which services and demands they involves. The above presented research shows that it is possible to work out subjective quality concepts. However, it is only a first attempt in a certain defined sector of education, and not representative. It reveals that subjective quality conceptions can be described concisely and differentiated but can not be taken as the ultimate catalogue for every possible scenario. Therefore the field of research and practice has to be opened further and in a systematic and structured way. Elements, aspects and factors which influence the quality of the learning process, which are determined by the learner and which can contribute to a better understanding of the learners’ context and the learning process have to be worked out. They can then form the first bits and pieces of a theoretical model for learner oriented quality development in e-learning.

It is important to better understand the converging processes of working and learning, gaining information, knowledge acquisition and competence development, in private and professional contexts. For these purposes the field of user centred research has to be defined clearly. The following four areas state questions which describe the field of user centred research which
are necessarily to be addressed in order to develop future learner oriented quality development concepts.

1. Evaluation of individual strategies in different learning scenarios/contexts: This covers research topics which assess individual strategies of acquiring knowledge and competences in different contexts, i.e., working environments, educational and private environments. A special attention has to be paid to converging processes in these contexts. Developments of empowerment and the responsibility shift from a teaching-oriented to a learning-oriented environment have to be surveyed. How do individuals cope with the new challenges they are faced with in the knowledge society and what implies the concept of a knowledge society for their context of living, working and learning?

2. Research on individual quality preferences and subjective quality concepts: What is quality from the point of view of a learner? How can subjective quality concepts be operationalised and generalised. Can a theory of quality from a learners perspective be formulated and state the interdependencies between individual learning contexts and quality concepts. How do learners see their involvement into the co-production process of learning-quality? And which strategies help learners to develop the necessary competences to acquire abilities and knowledge they need for their personal situation?

3. Research on individual educational/competence biographies and their influence on subjective demands and requirements for e-learning-processes: How are demands and requirements, also learning motivation, rooted in the personal situation of learners? What do we need to understand from learners biographical contexts in order to provide learning scenarios which empower learners? How can we bridge the gap between the personal, individual reality of learners, and the post modern constructivist rhetoric of Open Learning Environments?

4. Research on negotiation methods to integrate learners’ preferences: How can we integrate learners into the design process of e-learning-scenarios? What are suitable negotiation methods for the co-production of learning processes? How do teachers and organisations have to change in order to be able to enter into “goal-open” (Schäfter 2001) negotiation and learning-processes with learners which are then seen as quality experts for their own learning processes?

4. Learner Participation in Quality Development

Quality development hast to involve all stakeholders into a negotiation process (Manelle 2000) in which the learners needs are taken as a reference concept. This is confirmed by Ravichandran and Rai (2000): „Participation of users, vendors, and developers in the core design and development process promotes mutual understanding of issues and constraints to be addressed to improve quality.“ (Ravichandran/ Rai 2000). Tietgens (2003) views stakeholders in a learning context as quality experts. They are exposed to a constantly changing environment and can only themselves assure that education meets the requirements which they have in accordance with their contexts. In this sense a participation of learners in the design process of e-learning-environments is of key importance (Tietgens 2003). Zech (1997) suggests to combine an external perspective of the organisation of learning - the learners perspective - with an internal perspective - the point of view of the educational organisation. He suggests to view the different perspectives as equally important.

To provide learning according to the learners' needs, we suggest to conceptualise quality development as a negotiation process in which all stakeholders - and thus also the learners - have to participate in. It means to abandon the idea of using “objective”, externally prescribed rules and norms for quality development only, and to negotiate the norms and rules amongst the stakeholders. An important part in quality development - the definition of objectives and values - then is negotiated. This has two implications: a) All stakeholders of the e-learning-process are involved and have to be able (or have to empowered) to voice their needs in the quality development process. b) Quality is a continuously ongoing process which is not ending after a defined time when goals and objectives have been defined and measures are in place. They constantly have to be adapted to the contexts and requirements of learners and other involved stakeholders.

5. Conclusions: Towards Educational Quality Through Learner Orientation

The article elaborates learner oriented quality development as a necessity rather than an option if quality development is aimed at having an impact on the learning process. Quality development always has to be a connection of processes and procedures with values and normative decisions. Every facilitator, guiding a group of learners, needs a normative decision concept, like a didactical theory, to have a sound basis for his activities. Quality development which is relevant for educational processes therefore can be described as the sum of all activities and efforts carried in order to improve the learning process. The emphasis of the educational process indicates at this point already that it is not possible to certify such a learning process oriented quality. It can only be perceived when the actual educational process takes place and is always a co-production.
between the learner and the learning environment. In recent quality debates it is an often made mistake, to assess educational environments isolated from the educational processes and to not take into account the target groups and other stakeholders within the environment. Since quality is not a given, stable characteristic of an educational environment but evolves only from the relation between the learner and the learning environment, quality can only be perceived and assessed in the actual context. Also, there is no possibility to define quality criteria which define quality apart from a concrete educational context.

As a consequence quality development has to be seen as a process of negotiation in which all stakeholders need to participate. The aim of such a participative model for quality development is to define the values and objectives of the learning process together between the stakeholders. Such an active participation of learners will play an important role in future quality development systems. The learners have an active role in these concepts and need to be aware of their personal propositions and demands. In a way of self-management of their own educational biography they have to identify necessary characteristics which learning scenarios have to meet in order to enter into a successful educational process. Such participation processes demand for better information, transparency and counselling on the side of e-learning-providers. At the same time learners have to be aware that their own responsibility for quality development rises, as they themselves are viewed as quality experts in the learning process.

References


34. SLOAN-C VIEW ISSN 1541-2806 Volume 2 Issue 2 - April 2003


The study was set in the field of motivation and anxiety towards learning statistics in university courses.

The terminology for the transformation of society into a knowledge based, information based, media based society are diverse. There are constantly new concepts which show that the industrial age has come to an end: “Global Society” (Rost 1996), „Knowledge Society” (Stehr 1994), „Media Society” (Mettler von Meiborn 1994) or „Information Society” (Bühl 1995). They all focus on one and the same phenomenon which is described as „knowledge Society” in the article, as it is elaborated in the theory of knowledge Society by Peter Drucker (1969), Daniel Bell (1973) and Nico Stehr (1994).

The survey “E-Learning in Europe – Results and Recommendations, Thematic Monitoring under the Leonardo Da Vinci-Programme” (Nationale Agentur Bildung für Europa 2005) even comes to the conclusion that the majority of European e-learning projects (56%) are technology driven, as opposed to 44% characterised as learner oriented.

Sometimes the lack of theory for educational quality is substituted by the debate on competences - on the learner side, or a discussion on professionalism - on the teachers side. However, there are theories which a “quality theory” could be grounded on, like learning theories, evaluation models, socio-educational theories, etc.

For an account of the debate of the concepts of “objectivity” and “subjectivity” in science see Ehlers 2004.