Quality Assurance in Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces

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Abstract

This paper is philosophical in nature and we argue that Virtual Learning and e-Learning in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) present challenges to quality assurance that were unimaginable just a quarter century ago. This paper argues that implementing rigorous authoritative controls, higher institutions can ensure that students are working to attain credible qualifications, as they would be in a traditional learning environment. We theorise quality assurance as a virtue of professional practice; present quality culture as a pedagogic device for classification and framing; and propose a rethinking of Virtual Learning Environments and e-learning quality assurance praxis through framework of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003).

Keywords: **Quality, quality assurance, Virtual Learning, e-Learning, pedagogic device, Artificial intelligence**

1. Introduction and Background

Assuring quality as an agent of improving learning and teaching in Virtual Learning Environments and e-Learning spaces in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era is a complex phenomenon. The notions of quality and quality assurance in higher education, both as discourse and policy imperatives, are centuries old (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2016; Pitsoe and Letseka, 2018). Yet, quality is a multidimensional concept and has become an imperative term in higher education in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The purpose of the paper is to contribute to the 4IR discourses on the maintenance and enhancement of quality in the emerging landscape of Virtual Learning Environments and e-learning practice and delivery where new kinds of institutional challenges are emerging. This paper is philosophical in nature and we argue that Virtual Learning and e-Learning in the 4IR present challenges to quality assurance that were unimaginable just a quarter century ago. Notwithstanding the fact that there are a significant number of discourses on the meaning of quality and quality assurance, we shall argue that the concepts quality and quality assurance are virtues of professional practice. What we attempt to do is to defend the view that the concepts of quality and quality assurance, as social constructs, are fundamental parts in the implementation of Virtual Learning and e-Learning in the 4IR – both concepts are intimately linked with the notions of social stratification and policy enactment within higher education (Simui, Namangala, Tambulukani, and Ndhlovu, 2018).

This paper draws on frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003). Our thesis is that in the 4IR context, Virtual Learning and e-Learning practitioners "need to rethink their mindset of understanding quality and quality assurance and use the notion of quality to support students to fulfil their potential, and to develop the professional practice of academics, in order to make them become confident and motivated in what they are doing" (Cheng, 2016:9). Flowing from above, it becomes pertinent to ask, to what extent can frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) help in understanding discourses of quality in Virtual Learning and e-Learning in the 4IR? We acknowledge that Virtual Learning and e-learning environments "create great opportunities for both practitioners and students in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and cost" (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2018); and offer students an improved learning experience when compared to a more traditional learning environment.

In this paper, we hold that the frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) are relevant and applicable to the 4IR and AI quality assurance praxis.

Hence, we propose a rethinking of Virtual Learning Environments and e-learning quality assurance praxis through the frameworks of Harvey and Green's (1993) and Watty (2003). Drawing on frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003), this paper argues that implementing rigorous authoritative controls, higher institutions can ensure that students are working to attain credible qualifications, as they would be in a traditional learning environment. In doing so, we begin by conceptualising "quality" and "quality assurance". In the second section, we theorise quality assurance as a virtue of professional practice. The third section presents quality culture as a pedagogic device for classification and framing. The fourth section is proposing a rethinking of Virtual Learning Environments and e-learning quality assurance praxis through Harvey and Green's (1993) framework. We end with concluding remarks.

## 2. Conceptualising quality and quality assurance

To start with, the idea of quality originated around a century ago in "response to the need for standardisation" (Mertova, et al., 2010:1). As Harvey (1998:246) puts it, "quality has become associated with control and that the term 'quality' at present is too often used "as a shorthand for the bureaucratic procedures than for the concept of quality itself …". Much of the literature describes quality, both as social and power relations construct, as relative, a contested issue, slippery, dynamic, broadly interpreted, multi-dimensional, subjective and fluid in nature. Owing to its multi-dimensionality and complexity, it is an elusive and value-laden term. Yet, the concern for quality is not new in the higher education context the debate dates back to the 1980s. The concepts of quality and quality assurance are not neutral and have undergone a number of changes in focus, from industry and business into the public sector, including healthcare and higher education. Hence, quality assurance, as a practice, can be seen as an ideology – it is not independent of wider socio-economic interests (Pitsoe and Maila, 2014). It can further be argued that quite often, both concepts are used interchangeably.

Zuhairi's (2007:2) definition that quality assurance is "systematic management and assessment procedures adopted by higher education institutions and systems in order to monitor performance against objectives, and to ensure achievement of quality outputs and quality improvements".

There are a number of ways of viewing quality. It could be argued that throughout the past three industrial revolutions, the concept of quality has been vital and central jigsaw puzzle in providing excellent services to the clients in various organisations (such as education, clothing industries, machinery manufacturing, etc.). Among others, these various organisations do have slogans indicating their stance on their social construction of quality. Just to mention a few, (i) Levi Strauss & Co., that is traceable to the 1870s, believes that "Quality never goes out of style"; (ii) for the Sioux Body Shop, a family owned and operated business since 1991, "The quality of yesterday, the knowledge of today"; (iii) the basic beliefs Ford is that "Quality is Job 1, and there's a Ford in your future"; and (iv) the McDonalds slogan is "fast service, consistent quality."

For Henry Ford, an American industrialist, business magnate and the founder of the Ford Motor Company, "Quality means doing it right when no one is looking". Taking it further, John Ruskin, a leading English art critic of the Victorian era, holds that "Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort." Yet, quality is vital to successful organisations. In this paper, we depart from the assumption that quality is not an act, it is a habit. For us, quality is a lifestyle and culture brand, a standard and is remembered long after the price is forgotten.

Notwithstanding the fact that "quality can be defined as the embodiment of the essential nature of a person, collective object, action, process or organisation" (Pitsoe and Letseka, 2018), Watty (2003) contends that "quality is best defined as fitness for purpose in combination with exceptional high standards, perfection and consistency, value for money, and transformation capabilities", (see figure 1 below).
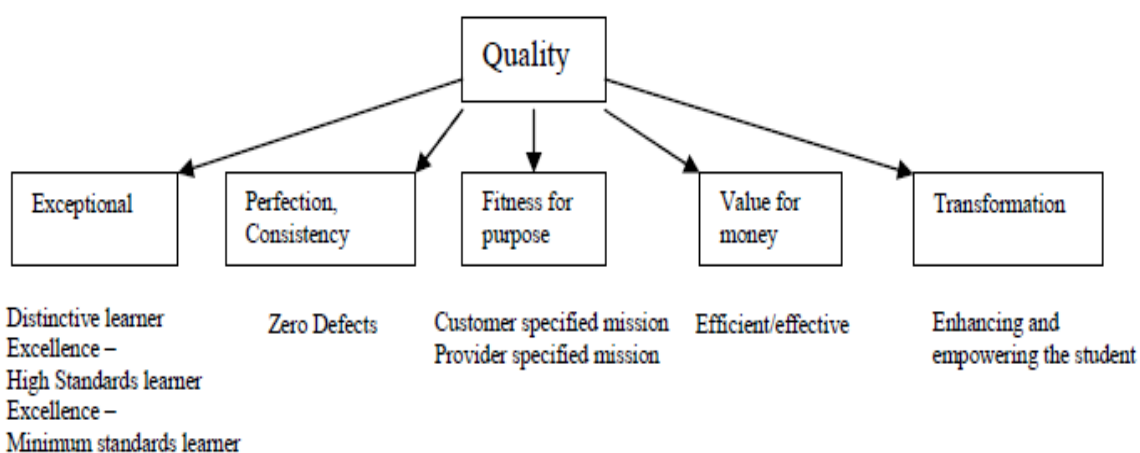
Nonetheless, in this paper, we shall adopt Belawati and

Figure 1. Definitions for quality (Source: Watty, 2003)

Further, Harvey and Green (1993) argue that, "notion of quality could be grouped into five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality." In higher education context, Harvey (1995) sees "quality evaluations as game playing to cast the evaluated programme or institution in the best possible light" (p.272) and offers the following brief overview of the five categories:

✓ The exceptional view [of quality] sees quality as something special. Traditionally, quality refers to something distinctive and elitist, and, in educational terms, is linked to notions of excellence, of "high quality" that is unattainable by most.

✓ Quality as perfection sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it "democratises" the notion of quality – if consistency can be achieved, then quality can be attained by all.

✓ Quality as fitness for purpose sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires – theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

✓ Quality as value for money sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the "customer" has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly, students require value for money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

✓ Quality as transformation is a classic notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge.

In summary, the concept quality, as an ongoing process of change is often difficult to articulate – it is a complex, multi-dimensional issue. Regardless of differing views on the meaning of quality, it is defined in terms of: fitness for purpose, value for money, consistency, zero defects and transformative process.

3. Theorising quality assurance as a virtue of professional practice

In this paper, our thesis is that quality assurance is a partnership between supplier (Virtual Learning and e-Learning organisation) and customer (student). For this reason, partnership must be guided and informed by virtues of professional practice (such as exceptionality, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation) in implementing and monitoring the quality of services of student support, student assessment, teaching and learning. Our view is that Virtual Learning and e-Learning leaders must ensure that adequate systems

are in place for securing the necessary quality of services and monitoring it over time.

Quality assurance is a particular form of social practice and engagement. Among others, it requires what MacIntyre (1984) pronounced as the core virtues of a practice: the virtues of fidelity, beneficence, non-maleficence, courage, truthfulness and justice. With this in mind, we ought to remember that quality assurance virtues are not hereditary and cannot be taught, they are acquired through habituation. Like skills or habits of proficiency, quality assurance virtues come by practice. In his work Nichomachean Ethics, Aristotle (1953) posits that "virtues arise in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature; but by our nature we can receive them and perfect them by habituation". Therefore, a virtue acquired is a guarantee of the corresponding act of virtue being forthcoming when called for.

There are very interesting quotations of virtue from various scholars. Aristotle (1953) sees virtue as a disposition to act. For MacIntyre (1984) virtues are dispositions "not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination; it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues". In Socrates' view "virtue is a wealth, and all the other good things that a man can have come from virtue". Taking it further, Aristotle believed that "virtue is more clearly manifested in the performance of fine actions than in the non-fulfillment of basic principles". Cicero (2014) views "Virtue is a habit of the mind, consistent with nature and moderation and reason".

It is noteworthy to indicate that virtue theory has a very rich history dating back to Classical philosophers; Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. For Weed and McKeown (1998:344), virtue theory "complements rather than competes with other theoretical and methodological ethical frameworks". It is further indicated that "virtue theory represents one of several ethical frameworks appropriate for scientific research in general". Perhaps, it is apposite to remark that virtues are qualities of character that scientifically produce good consequences. For Adams (2006), a virtue is a "persisting excellence in being for the good". In his work Quality in Higher Education: Developing a Virtue of Professional Practice, Ming Cheng (2016) convincingly demonstrates that "To say that quality is a virtue of professional practice is to insist that quality is one of the things that makes higher education valuable and worth participating in, and that makes learning enjoyable". He talks of quality as a "virtue of professional practice is a matter of personal ability and willingness to govern one's individual behaviour in accordance with values and commitments" (Cheng, 2016). Quality assurance, both as rules of morality and primary concept of the moral life, and MacIntyre's virtue theory have a dialectical relationship. We assume that quality assurance as virtue must be understood as dispositions leading a person to obey certain rules, and must become fundamental to agree on some set of rules in the pluralist

culture. From a MacIntyrean framework, our thesis is that in the 4IR Virtual Learning and e-Learning contexts, academic freedom, accountability, collegial rationality, managerial rationality, facilitative rationality and bureaucratic rationality are particularly relevant virtues of quality assurance praxis. Among others, these virtues of quality assurance praxis call upon the practitioners to aspire towards ideals and develop trails of character that enable them to achieve these ideals.

In summary, virtues provide an array of moral choices and can be applied flexibly in relation to the context of dilemma in the Virtual Learning and e-Learning organisation space. It could be concluded that the aforementioned virtues of professional practice (exceptionality, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformation) are consistent with the MacIntyrean framework. In the Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces, it requires that practitioners act to promote and protect the interests and dignity of students/clients by adopting the Best Practices for Quality Assurance: "creating a robust testing environment; selecting release criteria carefully; applying automated testing to high-risk areas to save money (It helps to fasten the entire process; allocating time appropriately for each process; prioritising bugs fixes based on software usage; forming dedicated security and performance testing team; and simulating student/ customer accounts similar to a production environment." (https://www.guru99.com/all-about-quality-assurance.html)

4. Quality culture as a pedagogic device for classification and framing

The praxis of quality culture is underpinned by the principles of classification and framing. Perhaps, it is key to highlight that the principles of classification and framing (i) provides a language as well as conceptual tools to analyse language codes, and to assist in understanding how those codes are established and maintained; and (ii) it enables and legitimises the potential discourse that is available to be pedagogised (Bernstein, 2000:27). Hence, this section draws mainly on Basil Bernstein's (1971, 1990, 1996, 2000) works – he had an insightful influence on sociological research on education. Among others, the concepts of class, codes and control were central to Bernstein's sociology. Bernstein (1990:118–19) conceded that:

> "The code theory asserts that there is a social class regulated unequal distribution of privileging principles of communication … and that social class, indirectly, effects the classification and framing of the elaborated code transmitted by the school so as to facilitate and perpetuate its unequal acquisition. Thus, the code theory accepts neither a deficit nor a difference position but draws attention to the relations between macro power relations and micro practices of transmission, acquisition and evaluation and the

positioning and oppositioning to which these practices give rise".

Quality culture is a stratifying pedagogic practice, and a pedagogic device for classification and framing. It is key to highlight that the notions of classification and framing are fundamental to Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse and practice. With this in mind, quality culture in the Virtual Learning and e-Learning contexts can be seen as the dominant agent of the field of symbolic control. According to Bernstein and Solomon (1999), "symbolic control is materialised through a pedagogic device (which is the condition for the construction of pedagogic discourses). The device consists of three rules which give rise to three respective arenas containing agents with positions/practices seeking domination." They further stress that "a pedagogic device consists of: (i) distributive rules attempt to control access to the arena for the legitimate production of discourse, (ii) pedagogic discourses are projected from positions in the reconceptualising arenas; and (iii) evaluative rules shape any given context of acquisition" (p. 269). On a different note, Moore (2013:2) asserts that "the structure of pedagogic discourse itself theorised through the principles of classification and framing and examined in terms of the social distribution of its modalities and their differential class effects".

For Bernstein (1990), classification and framing are "social class related and related to the fields of production and symbolic control". Bernstein (1971) writes that classification refers to "the degree of boundary maintenance between contents and is concerned with the insulation or boundaries between curricular categories (areas of knowledge and subjects)". It is further argued that "the concepts of classification and framing make possible and their powers of creating indicators of difference between schools at the levels of organisation, external relations, and pedagogic practice" (Bernstein 1990:4). He concludes that "classification and framing controlled selection of the contents of these rules, so regulating the process of acquisition and giving rise to different code modalities" (p. 4).

Quality culture is consistent with the Bernstein's principle of social stratification. It is crucial here to explicate exactly what is meant by social stratification. In his classic work, CLASS, CODES AND CONTROL: Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language, Bernstein (1971) remarks that "class is only one of many principles of social stratification and differentiation" (p. 62); and that "specialised social positions located in the system of social stratification" (p. 102). For him, "both autonomous and market-oriented visible pedagogies are relays of the stratification of knowledge, of social inequalities" (p. 76). He concludes that "shared competences, a simple division of labour, reduction in the strength of stratification is based upon work; specialised performances, complex division of labour, relatively strong stratification based upon work" (p, 180).

Taking it further, Parsons (1940) in his article, An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification, points out that "competing material interests must be understood as embedded in a broader cultural framework of values". Parsons (1940:841) writes, "social stratification is the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior relative to one another in certain socially important respects". Flowing from Parsons' thesis, as pedagogic discourse, quality culture in Virtual Learning and e-Learning settings plays a key role in transmitting dominant ideologies of society. From a Foucauldian perspective, "pedagogic discourse functions as a medium for other social voices or discourses such as class, gender and race".

Bernstein (1990:65) reminds us that "the discourses of education are analysed for their power to reproduce dominant/dominated relations external to the discourse, but which penetrate the social relations, media of transmission, and evaluation of pedagogic discourse". He further argues that "it is often considered that the voice of the working class is the absent voice of pedagogic discourse, but we shall argue here that what is absent from pedagogic discourse is its own voice." He writes that pedagogic discourse is "a principle for appropriating other discourses and bringing them into special relation with each other for the purposes of their selective transmission and acquisition" (p. 181).

To end this section, quality culture in Virtual Learning and e-Learning settings is inextricably linked with notions of social class; and plays a fundamental role in maintaining social order, specifically discourse concerned with higher education. The notion of quality culture in Virtual Learning and e-Learning is consistent with Basil Bernstein's theory of class, codes and control. It could be concluded that quality culture in Virtual Learning and e-Learning settings (i) can be seen as a pedagogic discourse; and (ii) is a tool for framing and symbolic control. It fits the lens of Basil Bernstein's classification, framing and social stratification. Quality culture in the 4IR context should be coined in such a way that it meets the needs of culturally diverse clients/students in the Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces. One plausible solution is to rethink Virtual Learning and e-Learning quality assurance practices through the lenses of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) – it is a fundamental part of quality assurance in Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces.

5. Rethinking quality assurance in Virtual Learning and e-Learning through lenses of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003)

As Talbot, et al. (2013:109) write, "Much of the literature which addresses the issue of quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE) has done so within the context of more traditional forms of delivery. Hence, this paper focuses on the 4IR Virtual Learning and e-Learning space. We assume that quality assurance in Virtual Learning and e-Learning setting requires a high degree of autonomous learning, but specialist support is in place to facilitate this process. It must be noted that Virtual Learning and e-Learning organisations are in a competitive environment. We depart form the assumption that they should adopt the quality philosophy, principles, and practices in order to satisfy students, as business customers. It is important to mention that dynamics such as competition, cost, and accountability have invigorated Virtual Learning and e-Learning organisations' interest in quality".

As Pitsoe and Letseka (2018) aptly put it, "In industry, commerce, government and now in higher education, the word 'quality' is on everyone's lips: quality control, quality circles, total quality management, and quality assurance." Perhaps, it is fundamental to mention that "quality assurance in higher education is a global concern" (Pitsoe and Letseka 2016; Pitsoe and Letseka, 2018; Pitsoe and Maila 2014:251), but particularly so for institutions involved in Virtual Learning and e-Learning. From a Social Representations theory perspective, the idea of quality assurance in Virtual Learning and e-Learning has both absolute and relative connotations. It is noteworthy to indicate that quality assurance, as an instrument of social reproduction in Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces, is not immune to socio-cultural knowledge and ideologies. Perhaps, it is critical to remark that quality assurance is a social construction, social reproduction and a social representation – it has an important dimension of social representation.

As Moscovici (1963:251) writes, "social representations are defined for groups, viz. as being shared by (the minds of) social group members". For him, "a social representation is understood as the collective elaboration "of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating". Moscovici (1973) describes social representation as:

> "systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history".

Against this backdrop, the idea of quality assurance, as spatial metaphor, is not strange to the discourses of Virtual Learning and e-Learning as pedagogic spaces. Brown (2004:1-2) defines pedagogic space as "the spaces, norms and pedagogical scaffolds, that emerge around shared [teaching] practices". Pitsoe and Letseka (2018) remind us that "quality in education is a combination of: exceptional high standards; perfection and consistency; fitness for purpose; value for money; transformation capabilities; and product of planning, monitoring, control and coordination". Desmond Tutu, a South African Anglican cleric and theologian, reminds us that "Inclusive,

good-quality education is a foundation for dynamic and equitable societies". Taking it further, Charles Rangel, an American politician, asserts that "A quality education grants us the ability to fight the war on ignorance and poverty". With this in mind, our take is that Virtual Learning Environment and e-Learning are to a great extent, matters of quality, not amount.

This paper raises a question: to what extend can Harvey and Green's (1993) framework guide and inform quality & quality assurance praxis in Virtual Learning Environment and e-Learning in the 4IR? The question of quality in Virtual Learning Environment and e-Learning is central to both international and national education debates and practices. Hence, understanding the symbiotic connections between Virtual Learning and e-Learning institutions and quality & quality assurance matters. Pitsoe and Letseka (2018) remind us that "While the e-learning paradigm creates great opportunities for both practitioners and students in terms of accessibility, flexibility, and cost, it also creates challenges for quality assurance."

Virtual Learning and e-Learning industries are undoubtedly business segments – they involve exchange of knowledge, skills, culture, and values; and provide service to their clients/students - among others, governments, employers, private funders and parents invest lot of money in getting a quality Virtual Learning and e-Learning for their students/ children. Departing Harvey and Green's (1993) work, our take is that quality in Virtual Learning Environment and e-Learning should meet customers' requirements. Notwithstanding the fact that defining "quality" in higher education is problematic, this paper argues that Virtual Learning and e-Learning institutions too need to prove that quality standards are assured and enhanced.

Notwithstanding the fact that very little, if any, has been written on Artificial Intelligence and quality assurance praxis in Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces, our view is that there is need to be innovative and adapt the frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) within the Artificial Intelligence philosophy. Central to this paper is the assumption that AI is everywhere and ought to be embraced in learning spaces. Given that the notion of AI has revolutionised quality assurance praxis, our take is that it must evolve to meet the constant demands of speed to market and ensure great customer experience. Notwithstanding the fact that quality assurance is an essential area of concern to organisations, Artificial Intelligence, among others, has the potential of (i) helping developers release error-free software; (ii) reducing instances of foodborne illness; (iii) letting humans focus on other tasks; (iv) detecting defects before products reach the market; (v) helping making quality assurance processed learners and (vi) providing better educational outcomes.

To summarise, quality assurance of Virtual Learning and e-Learning will always be in question – it is a static concept, complex and evolving. Like in other higher education settings, quality in Virtual Learning and e-Learning spaces fits through the lens (framework) of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) that (i) quality is exceptional, (ii) quality is perfection or consistency, (iii) quality is fitness for purpose, (iv) quality is value for money, and (v) quality is transformation. Given that "educational institutions do not aim to produce standardised products that are free of defects" Watty (2003) suggests that "the remaining four concepts of quality (excellence, fit for purpose, value for money, transformation) should be used as analytical framework for considering quality in higher education". Lastly, frameworks of Harvey and Green (1993) and Watty (2003) on praxis of quality assurance should be re-engineered within the context of AI.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we explored Virtual Learning Environments and e-Learning quality assurance through the lenses of Harvey and Green (1993), and Watty (2003). In this paper, which is philosophical in nature, the authors defended quality and quality assurance as critical parts in the implementation of Virtual Learning and e-Learning in the advent of the Forth Industrial Revolution(4IR), acknowledging that Virtual Learning and e-Learning Environments both create opportunities for accessibility, flexibility and improved learning experiences compared to more traditional learning environments. The authors also appreciated that quality is an ongoing process, and indeed a complex one. The paper further discussed the different theories associated with quality in depth: MacIntyre's virtue theory and Basil Bernstein's code theory. The paper ends with appreciation that Artificial Intelligence is here and that the world needs to embrace it in all learning spaces to enhance both quality and quality assurance praxis.

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