



## Qualitative Qualities, Meaningful Measurements?

### A Collaborative Exploration of the Performativity of “Quality” in the Audit Culture

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**Abstract** Many academics appear to have lost interest in the critique of practices and subjectivities in the neoliberal university. In this article, we insist on the value of keeping the critical debate on the neoliberal university alive, in spite of competition, individualization, and silence. We aim to contribute to the debate with thoughts about the ways in which “quality” is construed and measured in the evaluation practices that consume an increasingly large amount of academics’ time. In a process that began with preparations for a panel at the first European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in 2017, we use collaborative writing as a method of inquiry to explore how the use of “quality” criteria is performative in dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that inscribe us as subjects within neoliberal discourse in the audit culture. Finally, we argue that such reflexive exploration is important in order to cultivate meaningful pockets of critical, collaborative research and teaching practices.

*Keywords: audit culture, collaborative writing as inquiry, evaluation practices, neoliberal university, quality*

## Introduction

Academics today spend a considerable amount of time evaluating each other’s research in myriad assessment processes that are now integral to the distribution of internal university resources, applications for external funding, and submissions for publication. As responsibility for success and failure is individualized in these practices, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion—whereby certain forms of knowledge are privileged and others are marginalized—go unnoticed. Research proposals and articles are endorsed, critiqued, accepted, and rejected on the basis of quality criteria we apply as if they were neutral. This is so even though, if asked, most of us would respond that, of course, knowledge is always situated and quality criteria can never be

neutral. The use of quality criteria in assessment processes is performative in our inscription as self-monitoring, self-regulating subjects in neoliberal discourse.

“Which quality frameworks are available to us? Do we need them at all, and why? How do we choose to negotiate quality criteria and frameworks within the current evidence-based discourse?” These questions were included in the call for papers for the first European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry on “Quality and Reflexivity in Qualitative Inquiry” in Leuven, Belgium, in 2017. The questions inspired us to organize a congress panel that formed the basis of a collaborative, dialogic process culminating in this article. We consider the use of quality criteria to be central to the mode of governance regulating our practices as researchers and teachers in the neoliberal university. In our panel, we set out to examine how we ourselves articulate notions of quality in our daily lives in ways that often prevent us from seeing the potential openings we claim to pursue when doing critical, collaborative qualitative research.

The critical debate on practices and subjectivities in the neoliberal university has been going on for a very long time at congresses of qualitative inquiry, in the pages of qualitative research journals, in many books, in university corridors, and perhaps less and less frequently in university personnel meetings and governing organs. Many of us are weary of the debate and bemoan the futility of critique. As countless analyses have demonstrated, neoliberalism permeates practices and subjectivities, rendering active resistance so difficult (Davies & Bansel, 2007, 2010; Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006; Gill, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Pedersen, 2010; Phillips & Napan, 2016; Shore, 2010; Shore & Wright, 2000; Strathern, 2000). Some commentators have pointed out that the large body of ideological critique has not been accompanied by serious active resistance to the colonization of the academy by neoliberalism (Davies & Bansel, 2007, 2010; Davies et al., 2006; Gill, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2013). The colonization process has continued relentlessly and perhaps even intensified (Morrish, 2017).

At our own workplace, we observe two tendencies among colleagues. One is to quit altogether and leave the academy in disgust, protest, or desperation (Ahmed, 2014; Morrish, 2017; Speedy & Davies, 2015). The other is to distance yourself from the diehard critics (“all they do is criticize and play the ‘victim card’, they never offer constructive solutions”) and adopt an individual survival strategy of keeping your head down and “just getting on with it.” This survival strategy involves playing the game without ever contesting the terms.

We, too, are frustrated at the failure of critique to fuel effective and collective resistance. We are tempted to shut our mouths, cover our ears and our asses, and

play the game strategically to avoid upsetting ourselves and colleagues and being labeled, or even ostracized, as obstructive, uncollegial complainers whose critique is just “sour grapes” in the face of personal failure in evaluation processes. Our process revolving around the panel and this article is an expression of our refusal to succumb to the temptation to keep quiet and toe the line.

With the panel and this article, we insist on the value of continuing to contribute to critical scrutiny of conditions for meaningful knowledge production in the neoliberal university. At the same time, we are aware that we may appear as the sanctimonious and naïve self-proclaimed heroes of this piece, bemoaning the “blindness” of others! This makes us feel uncomfortable! Obviously, we are ourselves inscribed as subjects in neoliberal discourse and implicated in (re)producing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion when we evaluate our own and others’ work, whether we like it or not. Moreover, we are far from the only ones who do not like it. There are still many critical voices around; in this article, we draw on and echo those voices.

It is true that banging your head against a brick wall may just leave you with a bruised forehead. However, we would retort that joining forces in a collaborative critique of the performativity of “quality” may—our headaches notwithstanding—produce openings that enable us to think differently together. Building on the panel, our aim in this article is to contribute to ongoing critical debates on practices and subjectivities in the neoliberal university through the analysis of the performativity of the use of quality criteria in (self)-regulation. We hope that our contribution can generate openings that point to ways of cultivating meaningful pockets of critical, collaborative research based on dialogue, the inclusion of marginalized voices, and the recognition of the effects of power inequities.

Through our work with the panel, we recognized that we, ourselves, take a stance in the debate on what is, and what is not, good quality in research, and that we perhaps cling harder to our stance when discussing with others than we had imagined we would. However, in this article, we do not contribute to the debate on research quality by proposing adaptations, expansions, or alternatives to existing quality criteria. Instead, the aim of the article is to present a critical-reflexive analysis of the performativity of *all* quality criteria in (re)producing dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and hence inscribing us as subjects—whether willing or reluctant—in the universities of our times.

We would like to stress the worth of the collaborative nature of the process of which our preparation of the panel was part and this article the most recent step. Throughout the whole process, we have made use of collaborative writing as a method of inquiry, including autoethnography and poetic representation, to

coproduce insights and connections across different positions and affects (Frølunde, Pedersen, & Novak, 2017; Gale & Wyatt, 2012, 2017; Wyatt & Gale, 2014, 2017). We have been driven by a belief in the generative power of dialogue whereby difference is harnessed as a dynamic (Phillips, 2011). Cultivating dialogue across difference in collaborative writing involves trusting the ability of human beings “not just to think, ponder, or to ask questions but to be taken back and to share the sense of always becoming able to be surprised” (Gale & Wyatt, 2017, p. 356).

In what follows, we first briefly describe the collaborative process from panel to article and then, using collaborative writing as a method of inquiry, we present a product of the process in the shape of a dialogue between the two of us.

## The Process Informing Our Dialogue

When we unfolded our reflections on the topic in our first texts, these writings oscillated in untamed ways across different levels: the institutional, the disciplinary, the paradigmatic, the personal, and the political. Using the genre of dialogue throughout the process, we sought to create room for expressing doubts, sharing personal experiences and introspection, inviting other thinkers in, generating openings, and, not least, putting forward critical and reflexive (new) takes on the challenges we face in relation to notions of quality in our everyday work practices.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Writing Kickoff and Response Papers

We initially decided to each write a two- to three-page kickoff paper to each other, but the topic stimulated us so much that we wrote more than double. Each of us “chose” to put emphasis on different, but closely related, aspects as we responded “spontaneously” to the trigger question: What are your immediate thoughts on research quality? In preparation, we read recent journal articles on the topic. Based on the kickoff papers and a brief dialogue with each other on how to move on, we then prepared a response paper guided by the question: What made the biggest impression on you when you read the texts of the others—and why?

### 2. Presenting at the Congress Panel

In our panel at the congress, each of us began with a five-minute condensed presentation of the main points of our own kickoff paper followed by a 10-minute response

to each other's papers in which we expanded on the themes that had inspired us the most. The presentations were followed by discussion with a small audience.

### 3. Writing the Article

To pick up on the process and distil relevant analytical reflections on the performativity of quality through dialogue has been to navigate in and around the very same constraints, ambivalences, and mess of everyday life that we write about. Pragmatic negotiations, realistic considerations, and quick decision-making are what made the production of this article possible—as is the case with all our writing. We found ourselves in the tension between “writing up” a conventional paper—just getting on with it in order to get published—and collaborative writing as a method of inquiry, generating openings that we can live with and find meaningful.

We have organized the written dialogue below around four themes. Each theme represents a set of analytical reflections about the performativity of “quality” in inscribing us as subjects in, and hence reproducing, neoliberal discourse. The text on each theme is a rich fusion of fragments from the kickoff papers and response papers, thoughts and discussions stimulated by the comments of the panel audience, and our reading of new texts.

### **The Neoliberal Academic Subject and “the Quality Beast”**

**Christina:** I think that discussions about research quality are tricky because norms, disciplinary identity, relations, and affects are always intimately intertwined. It seems as if quality is associated with anything and everything and pops up at radically different levels and among different actors in society—from within and from the outside. A few examples are student evaluations of course quality, accreditation committees' thumbs-up and thumbs-down, and journals' peer-review processes—all digitally conducted and collated. I think I primarily understand talk on “quality” as a regulatory discourse. It disciplines us. Fifteen years ago, management at our university told us that we did not publish enough and that we were not good enough researchers. Quantity and quality were supposedly lacking, and the funding we obtained for research was insufficient. We did not live up to international standards and did not publish enough nor in the right journals. We should turn away from writing in Danish and prioritize publishing in English. That was when the new excellence programs found their way into the Danish research councils and competition among

Danish universities and among and within university departments was intensified. This whole process was fraught with institutional and personal tensions. With respect to personal tensions, those effects, I think, were insecurity, competition, stress, anxiety, resignation, and an eerie noisy silence.

**Louise:** When I think about the process you refer to, I remember a colleague who said that we as a department ought to discuss what we actually mean by quality; she was ignored by management and ostracized in the department as a “complainer.” I haven’t heard anyone suggesting we unpack “quality” since. And that was 10 years ago! Saarinen’s research tells us that there has been a shift from the beginning of the 1990s whereby the concept of research and teaching quality has moved from a controversial, discussable, and disputed topic to being something everybody celebrates without questioning—a “self-evident good that everybody wants” (Saarinen, 2010, p. 56). As “quality” has become taken for granted as a self-evident good, Saarinen argues, the focus has shifted to the technical question of how to measure it in systems of “quality assurance.” She notes that “the technical aspects of quality assurance gained more weight in the Bologna process as time went on, which framed quality as a technical act of quality assurance” (p. 56).

**Christina:** It looks to me as if the “quality flashlight” at Danish universities is now being turned toward teaching. But, at our place, we no longer get together among colleagues to strengthen teaching practices or the curriculum on the basis of pedagogical principles. Some of us are selected as coordinators to serve as guarantors of the quality of individual course modules. Cross-cutting collegial conversations about course content have ceased. We meet in order to adapt teaching to comply with administrative edicts based on economic principles. Teaching is configured so that it can be monitored, evaluated, standardized, measured, and weighed—preferably online. Educational politics have become centralized and distant and not, as they were before, a matter of collegial and professional collaboration among researchers with the autonomy, time, and engagement to develop research-based teaching. In what critics have dubbed the “audit culture,” the neoliberal academic subject is configured as a “responsibilized,” self-monitoring, self-regulating, entrepreneurial agent personally responsible for successfully meeting—or failing to meet—performance targets (Budak 2017; Davies & Bansel, 2007; Gill, 2010; Leathwood & Read, 2013; Spooner, 2015; Strathern, 2000). In many critical analyses of the transformation to a neoliberal mode of governance, scholars highlight the centrality of evaluation practices in self-regulation within the terms of the audit culture. For

instance, Spooner (2015) asserts that “practices, once meant to ensure quality and rigour, now instead operate as sites of subjugation, perverted by the ubiquitous, neoliberal audit culture” (p. 214). In Denmark, Hansson and Frederiksen (2001) point to the dangers of “benchmarking” practices that evaluate research on the basis of standardized performance criteria, as if research were like any other production process.

**Louise:** In the article we read by Ball (2012), he illustrates what has happened by describing his transformation from the 1990s until today as a reconfiguration from “welfare academic” to “neoliberal academic”: “I have been re-formed and re-made as a neoliberal academic subject. I think of my previous subjectivity as something like welfare academic. In the process of reform I have been made productive, responsible and enterprising” (p. 29). Davies and Petersen (2005) describe this subjectification process: “The forestalling of resistance is accomplished in part by persuading each individual academic to treat the effects of neo-liberalism as personal successes, responsibilities and failings rather than as a form of institutional practice in need of critique and transformation” (p. 77). If everything depends on individual choices and efforts, then attention is deflected from structural conditions and the play of power in institutional practices. Collective forms of responsibility, solidarity, and collaboration turn into voluntary work that takes time but is unpaid.

**Christina:** Yes, I agree, the way our department works produces harsh fragmentation and individual solutions to institutional problems. Reading your kickoff paper, Louise, made me think about how much I have withdrawn over the last years to be able to survive. It made me remember how important local supportive practices of feedback and collaboration, and also discussions about how to act politically, are. That is, if you wish to sustain and strengthen a local research community, if you want to encourage younger scholars to even consider a life with research. Your writing underlines how much we need each other to be able to resist, pursue, expand, and cultivate broader relations that last over time and bridge difference. The poem I write at the end of my first paper is filled with complete despair, and I look at myself from both the inside out and the outside in:

I like to read  
 but find it more and more difficult to concentrate  
 I’ve always enjoyed learning from others  
 There’s just so little time to meet  
 I know we are here to learn from each other

But I see fewer and fewer of all the fantastic people  
 My no-hat is worn out  
 My yes-hat is battered  
 They say that when quality is celebrated  
 it has already disappeared

**Louise:** I see your despondent, bleak words as an affective reaction to living under the yoke of disciplinary practices in which our creative energy is stifled, critique is rendered illegitimate, and the critic is labeled an uncollegial complainer. Quality is an important player in this story, so let's turn to it then, to how the discourse of "quality," *qua* its status as a self-evident good, is performative in maintaining this neoliberal mode of (self)governance and surveillance.

### **"Quality" as Floating Signifier**

**Christina:** "Quality" is put to work whenever convenient in diverse political and institutional contexts and moments, and it is a concept we all are invested in, but not in the same ways. We can look at the concept of quality as an empty or floating signifier, performative and affective in a number of completely different contexts. It is a perfect management tool that divides the world into what is inside and what is outside, what is good and should be endorsed, and what is bad and should be excluded. A floating signifier, as Laclau (1990) has theorized, is particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning (p. 28). Floating signifiers are signs to which different discourses struggle to ascribe meaning in their own particular terms.

**Louise:** I think it's useful to conceptualize "quality" as a floating signifier. "Research quality" is a particularly potent signifier in our world, and it operates with a taken-for-granted positive value which, in my view, has helped neoliberalism to colonize research practices with such ease. Some signifiers belonging to neoliberal discourse, such as productivity, production, performance targets, and effectivity, are clearly recognizable as belonging to this quality discourse, and so are "quality assurance" and "evaluation." In contrast, "quality" is not clearly recognizable as a neoliberal signifier, and it appears politically neutral and innocuous. Davies and Bansel (2007) have pointed out that "neoliberalism both competes with other discourses and also cannibalizes them in such a way that neoliberalism itself appears more desirable or more innocent than it is" (p. 258). By virtue of its apparent desirability, political neutrality, and innocence, quality—of all the neoliberal signifiers—may be



the most performative in devouring other discourses and spreading neoliberalism through its coarticulation with signifiers from other discourses such as “pluralism,” “diversity,” and “reflexivity.”

I also think that it gains strength as a signifier through its coarticulation with “excellence.” “Excellence,” like “quality,” renders the discourse “more desirable or innocent than it is” by virtue of its taken-for-granted positive value. Excellence has an additional meaning as a feature of research that is necessary in order for Danish research to compete successfully in the European and global knowledge economy, which, by the way, may be why the term is never translated into Danish, just like the term *impact*. How can we be against excellence?

You illustrate the effects of the apparent neutrality of quality in your panel presentation when you refer to “the unhappy marriage between women and quality.” It made me think about the frequent and often unchallenged argument in Danish debates about women’s representation that “it is not about gender, it’s about quality.” This, I think, demonstrates the performativity of “quality” as a signifier that, through its apparent neutrality, masks the workings of power and renders critique illegitimate. How can we be against quality?

### **Intermezzo: Their Quality and Ours**

In the congress call, a “we” interested in “best practice” is constructed—a community of qualitative researchers devoted to “the creation of innovative knowledge” to raise the quality of research. The call suggests that cultivating qualitative research provides “us” with possibilities to understand the complexities and richness of life; at the same time, “we” lack a commonly accepted language and agreed-upon framing that secure the quality of our conversation about research quality and research as a practice. It mentions that there is a need for a reflexive approach to disrupt the confines of what we consider “best practice.”

Many of the postfoundational contributions to arguments about research quality put forward suggestions for alternative quality criteria. The criteria are presented in the form of tool boxes, procedural recommendations, and checklists. While the form is the same as in the mainstream qualitative literature, the criteria suggested by postfoundational scholars extend beyond the bounds of postpositivism with its belief in evidence and rigour, and are designed to be expansive and flexible along the lines of Denzin’s pluralist notion of the “big tent” (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Denzin, 2008; Morrow, 2005; St. Pierre, 1997; Tracy, 2010). In line with postfoundational

epistemological principles, the suggested alternative quality criteria endorse thick description, transparency, reflexivity, social robustness, relational ethics, and inclusion. Many of these suggestions come from feminist scholars (St. Pierre, 1997). Designed to improve the standing of postfoundational qualitative research by improving its quality, they represent moves in the paradigmatic battle against postpositivism, a battle that encompasses a struggle against the neoliberal audit culture in which neopositivist research thrives and critical qualitative research is subjugated. As Denzin (2017) puts it, “the politics of evidence that define the audit culture marginalize critical inquiry” (p. 8). We think it is important to critically reflect on the consequences of alternative tool boxes, new procedural recommendations, and the perceived need for the development of a shared language and checklists as “the” strategy for winning the paradigmatic battle.

Our view is that, if the research community of practice revolving around qualitative inquiry conferences and journals can be considered a marginalized community under pressure (as is much critical research today), then it is relevant to keep alive and strengthen the discussion about the norms we follow when we evaluate quality in our writing and in the works of others. In particular, we consider it crucial to home in on the inclusions and exclusions taking place within as well as outside the research community.

## The Struggle for Recognition and Resources

**Christina:** I think you mention an important point in your kickoff paper, Louise, when you talk about the difficulties of getting collaborative research funded and published. You argue that, in the discussion on quality, a schism is constructed between postpositivism on the one hand and postfoundational, interpretivist research on the other, and that this has a very unfortunate consequence. It leads to the neglect of power relations between different types of postfoundational research.

**Louise:** Yes, what I want to underline is how dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are in play in the field of qualitative research itself. Certain forms of research are privileged and others marginalized, propelled by the neoliberal competition for recognition. I have noticed how it is a particular type of postfoundational, interpretivist research that is marginalized, namely, research that strives to honor relational ethics and critically displays the multivoicedness of the “we” in collaborative processes and

the tensions arising in the play of power in collaborative research relations. The story I wrote in my kickoff paper was called “I’m out in the cold, body and soul. There’s nowhere to go,” which are lyrics by Tom Petty. In the story, I described how I want to publish an article about a collaborative research project I have been part of. The object of study is collaborative practices in a multidisciplinary social and health team. It is absolutely crucial for me not only to analyze the team’s collaborative knowledge production but also to turn a critical-reflexive lens on the embedded tensions in a collaborative approach. I want my writing about collaboration to be transparent in ways that acknowledge that the objectification of the “other” is inherent in all processes of representation and that we cannot avoid representation. I wish to acknowledge and explore the power at work in constructions of “I’s and “we’s” and the “other.” I want to do that as I consider tensions related to power an omnipresent feature not only in the multidisciplinary social and health team’s collaboration with one another and their clients but also in their collaboration with me as researcher and in the production of a collaborative piece for a journal. This is in line with the long tradition of writing as a method of inquiry, which strives to reduce the authority of the researcher and facilitate reflections across multiple voices.

**Christina:** But where can you publish such a text?

**Louise:** I want to publish my article in a journal with a discourse community interested in the concept of dialogue, concrete work practices, and qualitative health research. But it has to be a discourse community that will appreciate and accept multivoiced/polyphonic writing committed to walking the talk of collaboration and dialogue in form as well as content, a community that has an interest in following research aspirations that stay true to relational ethics. Of course, there are some journals with large discourse communities that actively cultivate and celebrate writing that draws attention to multivoicedness and the collaborative nature of knowledge production through writing as a method of inquiry in performance texts. But as far as I know—and I have looked and looked—there is no journal of qualitative health research cultivating multivoiced, reflexive writing that is ranked among the leading journals in the Danish Bibliometric System. As a subject of the neoliberal university, I must admit that I have internalized the pressure to gain the bibliometric points that publication in a leading journal gives. Some journals on qualitative health research will allow a wee smidgeon of deliberately multivoiced, reflexive writing, but only if you put it in a box! Boxes clearly demarcate reflexive dialogue across difference from the apparently univocal, seamless, authoritative narrative of the “sovereign”

researcher. And never the twain shall meet. Because if they were to meet, the article would no longer live up to conventional quality criteria. It would be on the fast track to the reject pile!

In my kickoff paper, I told my story hoping it would function as an eye-opener with respect to the hidden exclusions within postfoundational research and hence serve as an argument for critical, reflexive analysis of the “we” of the field of postfoundational qualitative research community, a necessary step in constructive attempts to formulate more meaningful ideas about “quality.” My point is that the playing field is not level, and I highlight which approaches are at an advantage and which are to be found on the margins. Without such analysis, attempts to formulate quality criteria, including “big tent” pluralist criteria, risk reproducing the neoliberal individualization of responsibility for success and failure and, more generally, an uncritical take on the neoliberal competition for academic legitimacy, institutional status and support, and research funding. There is a high risk of individualizing responsibility for success and failure when you play the establishment game by its rules. The risk arises when we participate in the struggle from our own perspective and argue for our own particular cause, whether it’s new materialism, dialogism, or something else. Therefore, I think we need to address how power/knowledge is at work in the field of qualitative research in ways that are much more complex than the picture painted in the literature of a dichotomous fight between neopositivist qualitative research, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, poststructuralist and post-post approaches, including new materialism and dialogic approaches.

It is important that this platform strives for inclusiveness, based on recognition of the power imbalances within the field and also between university researchers and coresearchers/participating partners outside the university, in order to counter the fracturing of the field into cliques dominated by Anglo-American researchers.

**Christina:** So, what are you going to do?

**Louise:** I’ve made my decision, as I want my article to be published. I’ll compromise and keep the reflexive writing within safe-enough bounds knowing that compromise has its dangers. In strategizing in order to secure grants, publications, and institutional recognition and resources, there is an obvious risk of deradicalizing our work and compromising too many of our principles. In collaborative research, there is the risk of failing to live up to our responsibility to the other in accordance with dialogic, relational ethics, and to write in ways that invite dialogue.

## Places of Belonging and Meaningful Alternatives

**Christina:** I think the most common survival strategy in academia is to play the game tactically through partial appropriation and negotiation of the accepted discourse. You have to negotiate when it comes to both the format and content to be able to find a home for your articles.

**Louise:** It's a price I'm prepared to pay to come out of the cold and into the warm embrace of an international community of peers. I think our discussion of quality has brought to the surface a lot of lived difficulties, both issues we talk about and issues we tend to chuck under the carpet. I think that we need to cultivate alternatives that can pry us out of the rut of destructive self-regulation. Can we put together a survival kit to stay alive by staying together? What can we do to create stronger and committed belongings that go against the grain? The warm embrace of an international community of peers is a dream I cling to. How many people beyond the narrow confines of our networks actually read our articles after they've been put through the wringer of the peer-review system's quality control? Well that's another story. . . . I want to walk the talk of "dialogue across difference," I don't just want to bandy around the buzzwords or give empty promises of dialogue. I don't want my articles just to have monetary value as currency in the audit culture, buying me bibliometric credits so that I can meet performance targets and contribute to the economy of my university. (In Denmark, university funding is partly based on the number of bibliometric points produced by its workers.) There are many academics who feel this tension; listen to the final words of Pelias' 2017 essay on the pervasive, corrosive power of neoliberalism:

*Writing to make a difference, but wondering if any words I might offer is of much use for establishing comfort or support, correcting injustices, or generating space where we might talk together, real talk, honest, sensitive to each other, searching for ways to make our lives better, but questioning if any academic paper presented at a conference or published in a journal really matters, yet holding on to the promise, the potential, having committed to a lifetime of listening, reading, and writing, having little else, having only the next utterance that might make us possible. (p. 365)*

At the local level, in the university research group to which you and I belong, we work with dialogue—with our collaborative research partners in different fields of

practice as well as among ourselves—so that dialogue is a bit more than an empty promise. A bit is more than nothing; a narrow circle of collaborative partners and readers is more than nobody. An appeal to the promise of dialogue invokes the possibility of connection through invocation of a “we” in which we explore each other’s ideas and, in the dialogue across difference, cocreate new ones. Here, we pursue our curiosity and put our urge to judge ourselves and each other and our drive to meet performance targets on the backburner. In doing so, I think we appeal to, and are part of, consolidating strong and committed belongings.

**Christina:** Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) describes how the all-too-pressing global debates concerning borders, exclusion, security, identity, and social cohesion have reinforced the importance of engaging critically with the notion of belonging and its centrality to people’s lives and their political practices. Certainly, a generalized strong longing for belonging permeates contemporary societies and leads to sinister social movements on the far right. Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Kofman (2005) suggest that it is in moments when human beings feel destabilized, in moments of uncertainty, disconnection, alienation, and invisibility, that an obsession with finding a social place to feel at home, or at least connected, intensifies.

“Where do I belong?” is a recurrent thought for most of us. Asking this question is usually prompted by a feeling that there is a range of spaces, places, locales and identities to which we feel we do not and cannot belong. Belonging therefore involves an important affective dimension relating to social bonds and ties. . . . Collective places constructed by imaginings of belonging, however, are constructions that disguise the fissures, losses, absences and the borders within them. . . . They produce a “natural” community of people and function as exclusionary borders of otherness from which we all simultaneously exist inside and outside of. (p. 528)

Longing for belonging is an issue for the researcher as well. We all need to feel that we belong to groups that consider us good, suitable, worthy of membership and participation, or even interesting. I’m talking about longed-for vital collegial spaces of recognition, empowerment, and restitution. There is a need for reactivating our political commitment at the universities if future generations are to be prepared to face what they have to face. There is much to do in this transitory time where new political subjects are being mobilized. For me, the urgencies of our time push the quality discussion into the background and bring to the fore civil disobedience (breaking bad) with and in our research communities.

**Louise:** It's not easy to create new meaningful norms in inclusive communities. The question arises as to which basis we have for creating new norms in relation to quality. I suggest that curiosity about the other and his or her positionings should guide our ethics. We can take inspiration from Deleuze, who argues for a way of being in relation to others that distinguishes itself from moral judgement.

Morality is the system of judgement. Of double judgement, you judge yourself and you are judged. Those who have the taste for morality are those who have the taste for judgement. Judging always implies something superior to Being, it always implies something superior to an ontology. It always implies one more than Being, the Good which makes Being and which makes action, it is the Good superior to Being, it is the One. . . . In an ethics, it is completely different, you do not judge. . . . Somebody says or does something, you do not relate it to values. You ask yourself how is that possible? How is this possible in an internal way? In other words, you relate the thing or the statement to the mode of existence that it implies, that it envelops in itself. How must it be in order to say that? Which manner of Being does this imply? You seek the enveloped modes of existence, and not the transcendent values. It is the operation of immanence. (Deleuze, 1980)

An alternative to norms in which we constantly judge ourselves and each other could be norms based on curious, open engagement in collaborative research with participants outside the academy, an engagement that is constantly alert to relations of power in collaborative knowledge production and “critically addresses the ‘who’ of this ‘we’ to consider inclusions and exclusions, silences and affordances” (Gerrard, Rudolf, & Sriprakash, 2017, p. 391).

**Christina:** I remember an old text from 1999 where Newman engages in an online dialogue with two other well-known action researchers. For me, Newman represents a humble but sound argument for validity criteria in action research. Validity, she wrote, is something researchers use to convince their readers that their research processes and projects make sense. But, she continued, “the most any research account can really do (no matter what the flavor) is to allow the reader to take a fresh look at his or her own work” (Newman, 1999). The discussion about the reach and impact of academic work has historically been important to action researchers because action research has often had its back against the wall in discussions of quality in the face of accusations of poor research accounts and a lack of validity and coherence. Since Newman seems to be satisfied if her research generates new

insights for her readers in relation to their own work, then questions of methodological frameworks, quality, ethics, validity, and generalizability take a back seat. She argues that “it’s precisely our different views of ‘reality’ that are important to understand so that from time to time we can step out of our own limited perception and entertain alternative interpretations of that world.” This resonates with, and supports, my conviction that we need the different other to generate reflexive knowledge about our practices. The concept of validity, according to Newman, is a red herring, and quality criteria need to be tailored to fit the core principle of action research, namely, democratic participation in processes oriented to changing the status quo.

Newman’s position made a big impression on me because she was so open and courageous; she actually dared to turn her back on the establishment. She chose to collaborate for years with teachers and the teachers’ union without publishing in peer-reviewed journals. She had realized that the collaborative research she and teachers found meaningful would not achieve recognition and funding from the research establishment and she took the consequences.

## Openings in In-Between Times

**Louise:** Christina, your kickoff paper presents an ideological critique. But is your paper not just yet another expression of ideological critique that doesn’t lead to more active or constructive resistance? Can we do anything more than criticize “quality” as a disciplinary, regulatory device? You argue that we shouldn’t try to replace postpositivist quality criteria with alternative checklists, and you end on a pessimistic note, with that evocative poem expressing your weariness. You state earlier in your paper that your own ambition is “to participate in research that makes a difference. Research that touches thoughts and relations, research that generates unexpected, disturbing, and productive questions in others and ourselves. Knowledge that produces joy and (micro)contributions to processes of social change,” and, I would add, as opposed to “impact”! You also refer to the book you are writing as a symbolic lifebelt in the sea of absurdities in the neoliberal university and to collegial contexts in which we care for and help each other. I think your research ambition and your book generate meaning at the local level. So I would like to end our dialogue on an optimistic and, I’m afraid, rather naïve and corny note! Positions and practices like your research ambition and book are the openings that we can cultivate and that can give us hope. That hope may appear naïve, but it is realistic because you and many of us are already cultivating these



openings; we may be weary but we haven't given up. Yes, sorry, I did warn that it was going to be a naïve and corny happy ending!

## Inviting the Other

Closing our dialogue on Louise's optimistic note and opening up our dialogue to others, we will now echo the words from the title of Poulos' 2017 piece, "resistance, resilience, and remembrance," and allow the Danish writer Suzanne Brøgger (2017) to fill these words with her visions (our translation).

**Susanne Brøgger:** Every person must, sooner or later, become conscious and decide how much or how little they want to succumb to the constant brainwashing of their surroundings. Be aware how each of us every day, in our daily lives, experiences growth, overgrowth, malformations, and death, strength and weaknesses in everything between heaven and earth. . . . Already when I was in my 30s, I became aware that many people experience the world as flat and meaningless. I realized that the substance of life was a gift that could also disappear, that the whole thing could collapse and become flat as a pancake without rays, light, or meaning. How can we avoid the flat universe?

In my experience, by opening up more and more meditatively, even if it is tempting to stop going on, you have to keep going in the confidence that life is big enough. We live in a paradoxical age in which, theoretically, there is a lot of freedom but, in practice, our lives are bound to a thousand demands. It is required of us that we live our own lives. But if you want to be perfect and are dependent on "likes," then you are in a really weak position.

## Note

1. While this article is coauthored by two of us, both colleagues from the same university department and research group in Denmark, a third colleague from another Danish university participated in the process up until the writing of the article. Ironically, a key aspect of working conditions, the pressure of work, prevented her from taking part in the final part of the dialogic process, the writing of this article.

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