
Closing the Circle: Outcomes Assessment, TQM and the WPA

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Introduction

Outcomes assessment initiated a controversy at our institution that has generated more heat than light. In the best academic tradition, we have appointed a series of ad hoc faculty committees to coordinate our response to the North Central States Accreditation Association's requirement that we have a plan in place prior to their next visit. As WPA, I serve on three of these committees. The committees write concept papers and design implementation plans, then revise them, hoping all the time that the visit will come and go while we are still debating. And according to the literature, our response is representative.

Why do we resist the accountability movement? The attention given outcomes assessment by legislators, lobbyists, and the tax-payers suggests a watch dog motivation and threatens a new wave of meddling, so we do need to be cautious. Moreover, encouraged by the standardized testing industry that views outcomes assessment as a cash cow, some administrators want results reported as bottom-line numbers. We must resist such reductionism.

But the charge of outcomes assessment is sensible, actually healthy. It simply asks us to articulate our objectives in concrete terms, develop instruments to measure student performance in terms of those objectives, and use that information to initiate reforms and revise curriculum in response to student, institutional, and public needs. Compared to other accountability schemes, outcomes assessment has a distinct advantage. It is recursive. Ideally, the process institutionalizes a feedback loop. Defining goals, measuring outcomes, and revising curriculum all circle back on one another, encouraging constant reflection and improvement.

Here we meet a paradox. Unlike most faculty, WPAs do not find outcomes assessment unreasonable. Program evaluation has long been one of our primary concerns. If anything, outcomes assessment promises more productive evaluation than currently exists. Outcomes assessment situates a writing program in a larger context, in the department, college, institution and society. As program advocates we understand that credible program evaluation legitimizes claims for resources. As a consequence, we have developed respectful relationships with psychometricians and statisticians. Their methodology and language can help us gain access to higher administration and the public; we need them as allies.

Here's the nut. We are stuck between faculty resistance and the public sector's (and thus the administration's) affirmation of outcomes assessment. Administrators charges us with completing outcomes assessment, but without faculty cooperation we cannot do our job.

The Spectre of Business

How do we deal with this dilemma? Obviously, we need to know more about outcomes assessment, so we can understand its motivation and objectives. When we look, however, we may not like what we find; the rationale and methodology of outcomes assessment originate in professional management. Ironically, while higher education's interpretation of outcomes assessment has a decidedly empirical emphasis, professional management has acknowledged through long experience the failure of purely empirical assessment. Management's latest strategies, foremost among them Total Quality Management (TQM), invoke complex social theories and have a decidedly humanistic orientation. As WPAs, our most productive response to outcomes assessment and its related controversies is to inform ourselves about management theory, especially TQM, and, when appropriate, apply their methods to our advantage.

In the past, faculty have resisted borrowing concepts and schemes from business. Our distrust of the values that dominate the business culture creates an almost knee-jerk reaction against business-based innovations. Given the relations between the accountability movement, outcomes assessment, and the quality movement in business, however, viewing our own world through a TQM lens might be productive. TQM and its cornerstone, the Quality Circle, offer constructive ways of rethinking our assessment practice while maintaining local control.

Once understood, TQM's values reflect several ideals of higher education. Total involvement, a focus on process, inter- and cross disciplinarity, teamwork, collaborative decision making, and other practices encourage individual and team initiative, innovation, integrity, involvement, and empowerment. The principles and practices of TQM foster an ongoing self-conscious process of reflection and research. Constant analysis and measurement of needs and expectations allow for feedback, efficiency, and improvement in what is done and how.

More than altruism motivates a close look at TQM. Understanding its origins and development may help us deal with the new political reality signaled by the 1994 Congressional elections. According to a "States of Mind" profile in the *New Yorker*, Newt Gingrich extols the values of the quality movement to the point of including "Quality as described by Deming" as one of "The Five Principles of American Civilization" in his video lecture series, "Renewing American Civilization" (December 5, 1994, p. 84). If Gingrich is the future, then the future will include TQM.

Self interest is another motivator. As we explore outcomes assessment and TQM, we hold a mirror to ourselves, seeing clearly in the reflection blem-

ishes we can examine and eliminate. Such is the case in the project we will report. After discussing controversies over outcomes assessment and the accountability movement in general, we will consider recent developments in professional management, especially TQM, and their relevance to our work as WPAs. We will offer a primer in TQM practices so WPAs can discover ways to appropriate its methods to our best advantage. Finally we will describe an application based on TQM values that encourages novice teachers to become responsible for the quality of their own teaching.

Evaluation Paradigm Controversies

Christine Hult's edited anthology, *Evaluating Teachers of Writing* (1994), offers a detailed treatment of recent evaluation controversies and exemplifies our discipline's ambivalence towards outcomes assessment. As a prolegomenon to evaluation praxis, it raises questions concerning values and methodologies, summarizes conflicting views, and suggests responses. The controversies are more pointedly developed in the "Viewpoints" cluster in the October, 1993, *Research in the Teaching of English*, where traditional psychometric theories of evaluation shudder against attacks from newer naturalistic approaches, especially those offered by Guba and Lincoln in *Fourth Generation Evaluation* (1989) and subsequently by Guba and others in *The Paradigm Dialog* (1990). In *Toward a New Science of Educational Testing and Assessment* (1992), Berlak and others frame the struggle as a life and death battle between the positivistic psychometric model they portray as socially oppressive and a naturalistic model they argue is sensitive to diversity, human rights, and freedom. The controversies originate in recognizing the limits of positivism. Empiricism has its role, but its methodology does not lend itself to examining complex social processes. More and more, evaluation scholars are paying as much attention to people, their interactions, and to processes as to empirical measurement.

Of the writers represented in Hult's anthology, David Bleich is the most openly ideological in posture and subversive in purpose. His goal is replacing the current status- and competition-dominated evaluation paradigm with one based on the feminine values of cooperation and other-centeredness, turning evaluation into a tool through which teachers can demonstrate and enhance the quality of their work. His attention to teachers and teaching reminds us that WPAs manage several "outcomes." Outcomes assessment directs us to the quality of student writing. But to do so we must also consider teachers, especially those of us who train GAs and other novice teachers. These two, student writing and teacher development, are closely linked.

Bleich begins by discussing conventional administrative attitudes toward teaching, attitudes characterized as oppressive and negative. Teaching must be evaluated and specific plans developed to remedy the deficiencies evaluation will naturally reveal. That evaluation could substantiate successful, high quality teaching, Bleich notes, is never admitted. Undoing this prejudice becomes his challenge.

Bleich examines traditional administrative attitudes by deconstructing Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990). Offered as an argument to increase the value placed on teaching per se, Bleich contends that the report does not challenge the existing meritocratic organization of higher education with doctorate-granting universities at the top and two-year colleges at the bottom. According to Bleich, the devaluation of teaching originates in these hierarchies. In our context, as long as teaching is undervalued, then the outcome associated with teaching, student writing, will be underdeveloped. Thus, assessment is self-defeating. The quality of student writing will reflect the low value placed on the teaching of writing.

Bleich argues for a new non-status-based consideration of teaching. His strategy is radical: change the language to change the reality. Rather than "excellence," with its hierarchal connotation, he suggests "vitality." Such a change encourages teachers to pay attention to the quality of their teaching while avoiding competition and odious comparisons. "If teachers who are actually striving for something like 'vitality' in teaching situations are distracted by the competitive feeling that they must become excellent according to some system of judgment, there will no longer be any reasons to take risks in the service of vitality: there will only be reasons to accommodate the system" (18).

As much as we admire Bleich's critique of the current paradigm, we live in a complex world without the option of dismissing either of the competing views, needing to attend to both. Bleich fails to demonstrate a concrete link between vitality and excellence. Common sense warns us that vitality is not automatically synonymous with excellence; many lunatics live with great vitality. But vitality, properly directed, can lead to excellence. Vitality is an aspect of process. Excellence links process *and* product; we cannot forget that. Eschewing competition and comparisons risks dichotomizing process and product. This is a false dichotomy; quality, excellence, whatever the term, integrates process and product.

Bleich offers another linguistic substitution to shift the emphasis from the competitive "excellence" and "measurement" model to one concerned with quality reflected in process:

But suppose the term 'involvement' were substituted for 'assessment': self-involvement, teacher and mutual involvement. Wouldn't the resulting terms then necessarily refer to the substance and daily activity of teaching, rather than imply that teaching is done first and then 'techniques' are used to evaluate it. Similarly, if the *idea* of involvement more generally took the place of measurement and assessment, wouldn't the process of evaluation and self-evaluation become an ongoing, internalized aspect of all teaching? (18).

Echoing a central tenet in professional management's quality movement, Bleich argues that "substance" derives from a dialectic between actor, act, and outcome, between the teacher and who she is, what she does and why, and what students do as a result.

Bleich's suppositions are, of course, rhetorical. As a concrete application, he describes a teaching evaluation scheme using portfolios at Syracuse University. Teaching portfolios offer a non-competitive means of allowing teachers to describe the coherence and quality of their teaching practice. The portfolio collects a wide variety of documents, including philosophical rationales, assignments, and student work, through which faculty demonstrate that their teaching is coherent and purposeful, evaluation is ongoing, performance is strong, and quality is constantly improving. In short, that the teacher is vital and involved. To avoid solipsism, the portfolio is addressed to an audience of peers, a community similarly invested in articulating teaching quality.

From a political perspective, however, we question Bleich's confidence in a community's ability to balance the interest of all its members, especially when many of them are served quite well by the status quo. Bleich's rhetoric does not address the hierarchies that exist in departments. Writing programs housed in English departments are particularly vulnerable. Even in Bleich's dream vision of properly valued teaching, the teaching that will be valued most will be that which enjoys highest status in the department, teaching literature at the advanced levels. Other missions, especially our "service" mission, teaching writing at the lower levels, will continue to be undervalued.

Nevertheless, we endorse Bleich's vision. He is working to empower teachers, challenging them to establish the terms of evaluation, and to begin a negotiation by offering the portfolio to the community. In his system, teachers must write the quality of their own teaching and read the quality of others. All must be involved. The emphasis is on quality and process. This same rhetoric dominates TQM.

By showing how an evaluation scheme can reflect the values of the rhetoric and composition community, Bleich moves us beyond merely reacting to the accountability movement. He helps us appropriate it to our ends. As a discipline we need no longer resist accountability; we need to make it central to our practice and culture.

The Search for Method: Learning to Talk with Each Other

Bleich has written us back into the accountability movement by encouraging conversations about quality in teaching, but he does not show us how to talk with each other. We still need a method through which we can document and elaborate the quality of our practice.

We recommend looking beyond our discipline for some help learning to talk with each other about quality. Though we anticipate objections, we recommend looking at professional management, specifically TQM, for techniques we can adapt to start our conversations about quality. Professional management as a discipline is centrally concerned with questions of quality and how to use human and material resources most effectively.

We will argue that TQM can make a substantial contribution to writing

program administration by providing WPAs a theory of management and a method for focusing on quality. Let us be clear. We reject many of the values and metaphors of professional management, especially trivializing education as a phenomenon of material economy as signaled by applying the metaphors "client," "customer," or "product" to students. Our challenge is to use our resistance to professional management positively, critiquing its methods and values so we can adapt some while rejecting others. When we look closely at recent developments in professional management, especially those related to TQM, we will see that they are trying to solve the same structural problems, especially that of hierarchically imposed, remediation-motivated evaluation.

TQM: A Primer

In the last few years management has come to discover that manufacturing and commerce, like education, are rich and complex social acts. The consequence of this discovery, evident in the TQM movement, is a paradigm shift through which outdated, mechanistic management approaches have been supplanted by more complex ones. These innovations evidence a concern not only for production numbers and zero defects, but also an intense concern for the human side of work.

TQM and other recent developments in management react against the old "Taylorism" approach, the theory that dominated business from the 1800s until recently. Taylor distrusted an organization's or a line-worker's ability to evaluate situations and solve problems. TQM, in contrast, advocates that workers are experts, and they can improve the system by working "in" it. Taylorism, also known as Scientific Management, ignored worker groups, their social nature, and their needs. Taylor believed that only outside experts could bring reason, order, improved productivity. TQM philosophy believes that workers can and should accomplish those things. Taylorism, according to Weisbord, became synonymous with "speedups, employer insensitivity, people turned into robots" (61). Scientific management searches for simple solutions. Complex problems, however, don't have simple solutions.

Ironically, the management system of most educational institutions is based on Taylorism, with few academic administrators having substantive background in management theory. Thus our practice either continues the status quo or reflects highly idiosyncratic, perhaps autocratic, practice. Without a theory base, we can only repeat what has been done to us or devise systems based on insights that have not received close scrutiny. The further irony is that while management systems are now searching for theories that consider a more complex, multi-dimensional approach to improve quality and for sophisticated tools to measure those improvements, education has become more and more focused on single-factor quantitative measures. Maybe it is time for us to look more closely at management systems adapted by business.

TQM has been developed gradually over the past sixty years by propo-

nents such as W. Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran, and Philip Crosby. Deming and Juran led the Japanese to understand that specialists were not necessary—that everyone can improve quality. This idea gave birth to the Quality Circle. Thus Americans championed an approach to quality that became largely responsible for Japan's economic resurgence after World War II. With the addition of Philip Crosby's concept of "Zero defects," the quality movement as we know it took shape.

In the U.S., the major move towards TQM began in the 80's. Firms like Motorola and Ford took up the call for quality becoming "everyone's job" and "Job 1." Xerox, Federal Express, IBM, Westinghouse, Disney, Corning, Hewlett-Packard and others followed suit. As Seymour notes in *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education*:

The fact is that TQM has made a difference in organizations around the world. It cannot be dismissed as another management fad. It is not academic whimsy. It is too well-grounded in a scientific approach to problem solving, and it has been tested, scrutinized, and revised in thousands of organizations over a period of more than three decades.

Bottom line: It works (ix).

TQM allows us to pay attention to the complexity of any situation where people and process are intricately interwoven. Rather than a linear process which cannot make allowances for multiple variables, TQM provides an evaluation matrix that analyzes all aspects of the system.

From an outcomes assessment perspective, adapting TQM values allows us to argue vehemently against using external standards to measure outcomes, whether standardized test scores or schemes that would have us ship documents to outside groups for evaluation. Through TQM we learn how to demonstrate the quality of existing practice and exercise control over plans for change. With clearly articulated TQM-based assessment programs, we can convince higher administration and the public that we accept, even celebrate, our obligation for accountability. Clearly, concerns for accountability motivate much of outcomes assessment.

Most features generally associated with TQM—such as quality training, process improvement, and benchmarking—do not generally produce advantage. What does produce advantage are certain tacit, behavioral, imperfectly imitable features—such as open culture, employee empowerment, and executive commitment. These tacit resources, not TQM tools and techniques, drive TQM success. Organizations that acquire these features, according to Powell, build on a theory, not a system, that works. Reducing TQM to a "system" will surely lead to the same failure that has been produced by older unproductive systems of management.

TQM is often inadequately defined, with individuals from different backgrounds having different perceptions of the subject (Ronen and Paas). A majority of organizations fail to understand or realize its true potential. One of the most serious deficiencies of many TQM efforts, according to Batten, is a

tendency to view and practice quality management as a rigid process that takes place in a *segment* of the total organization. When it fails, it is often because it was not applied within a *total* quality culture. Companies that have failed in attempts to implement TQM have failed to understand its multi-faceted dimensions, and have tried, instead, to use it “as a panacea to solve all their organization’s problems or to engineer unpalatable strategies” (McManus).

Despite the claims of some of its detractors, TQM is not dead. It has been misunderstood, misused and misapplied, but it is not dead. The concepts at the heart of TQM have resurfaced every few years with variations, each time under a new name, and each time meeting with incrementally greater success than the previous time. This is due, in part, to a shift in management attitudes from strict authoritarianism—a far greater influence than many readily recognize—toward a practiced belief in true participative management. The closer the management paradigm shifts toward the open participation advocated by TQM, the greater the chance for successful implementation (McConnell).

Success in the late 1990s and the 21st century will require business and educational organizations to become flexible, knowledgeable, balanced, sensitive, and responsive (Hertz). We endorse these values. As WPAs we must be open to theories and philosophies that facilitate practicing these values.

From Outcomes Assessment to Continuous Improvement

According to Chaffee and Sherr, “assessment should serve two purposes: assessment should show that colleges and universities are achieving their intended outputs (the accountability function), and it should provide information that permits faculty and administrators to improve what they do (the improvement function)” (84). Early approaches emphasized accountability with multiple end-point measurements to demonstrate important outcomes. In so doing they overlooked the second aspect of the assessment mandate, discovering and solving problems during the course of a student’s education.

Recognizing this difficulty, assessment proponents began to call for campuses to *use* the feedback provided by assessment to plan for change. However, they underestimated the importance of taking into account from the outset the need to identify where, how, and what kind of improvement might be required. They focused instead on trying to “inspect quality into education at the end of the line. That is, assessments occurred only at the end of the year or at the end of general education or major course sequences. TQM offers an alternative, more effective approach: Ensure quality at every step in the process” (Chaffee and Sherr, 84).

Assessment, as traditionally conceived, is iterative, while TQM is continuous. In the end, proponents of assessment who believe in continuous improvement could find themselves changing not only their practice but also their language. Perhaps the “assessment movement” would be more aptly thought of as the “quality movement” or, even better, the “improvement initiative” to

complete the evolution away from an outcomes oriented, testing-driven concept. From an academic point of view, we might focus on Continuous Learning Improvement" (Chaffee and Sherr, 87).

A Comprehensive—and Controlling?—Training Program

Over the years the writing program at New Mexico State University has developed a strong sense of purpose and identity. We focus on the GAs who teach the vast majority of first-year writing courses, striving to develop in them a sense of competence despite their lack of experience. We offer extensive staff development, including as many as 100 hours of direct training and supervision during a GA's first semester of teaching. We provide a theoretical and methodological orientation and a substantive academic course to help novice teachers become confident that they can teach effectively and thus enjoy a level of comfort in their classrooms.

We begin each semester with a week-long preterm orientation required of all who have not previously taught college-level composition. Training continues in ENGL 571, Problems in Teaching Composition, a semester-long three-credit graduate course in theory and pedagogy normally taught by the WPA. In addition, each new GA meets in conference with the WPA every other week to discuss his/her teaching. Through the semester, the assistant WPA leads a weekly session for all GAs, but especially for new GAs, providing nuts and bolts information about working through the syllabus. New GAs are mentored by experienced GAs, and they receive additional Writing Center tutor training.

We view our program as a model, exemplary in assuming administrative responsibility for providing writing students and teachers alike support and direction. And yet we knew it was not working as well as it could.

As we looked closely we discovered that the structure and emphasis of the program maximized administrative control, a major weakness from a TQM perspective. A program designed for maximum administrative control requires rigid top-down organization. Staff creativity is, at best, stifled. At worst, the structure can oppress and alienate the staff, causing some to resist and subvert the program.

A Lens on Limitations: Evaluation

One example of the inadvertent effects of our thorough training process is the program's scheme for evaluating student writing. New GAs and novice teachers have a difficult time articulating and applying standards so students can understand them and recognize that the standards are not arbitrary or unfairly subjective. Our evaluation scheme tries to address both instructors' and students' concerns.

We use portfolios for evaluation. Each portfolio, which represents all the

major emphases of the course, includes four elements: a common essay, written by all students on a common topic under controlled conditions; a researched essay; a substantial revision of an essay written earlier in the semester; and a reflective essay evaluating the student's performance and learning in the course, using the student's own writing to prove her argument. The researched essay is the longest piece students complete during the semester, spending three weeks to a month researching, drafting, and revising the piece, conferring with instructors about topics, research strategies, and the written text several times. While all other essays can be revised even after they have been submitted to the instructor for evaluation, the researched essay cannot. For final evaluation purposes, we need to see how far the student can bring the essay while working on her own and in her peer groups. In the portfolio, the writing must stand on its own. It represents the student's actual performance and is evaluated as objectively as possible to assure accuracy and consistency. In addition to these four elements, students are also encouraged to compile all their work through the semester into a course book and include it as a supplement to the portfolio.

From the perspective of outcomes assessment, we already have in place all the elements needed to examine student performance. Collecting and analyzing the materials is the challenge. We are currently developing a "course" portfolio, using sampling procedures to collect a manageable amount of materials for primary trait analysis to investigate student outcomes. Actually, we have been using the portfolio scheme for program evaluation since its inception more than ten years ago. We track grades, consider correlations between common essay performance and course grade, and we sample portfolios. But these activities do not encourage the curriculum development we feel is needed to meet our objectives. These empirical measures are valuable, but they provide us no direction for improving practice.

Support for GAs during evaluation comes in two forms: training in portfolio evaluation and grading common essays. During the pedagogy class, GAs complete a portfolio evaluation exercise in collaborative groups. This exercise occurs before students compile portfolios and helps instructors articulate and clarify expectations. They review previously submitted portfolios and must come to agreement on the grades these portfolios should receive. In the process, they define the levels of competency expected for students to earn particular grades. They also examine anomalous portfolios in an attempt to anticipate any problems that might arise when they evaluate their own class's portfolios. Instructors know their students' capabilities best, so they maintain autonomy over evaluating their students' portfolios and assigning grades for the course.

The common essay score also becomes part of the portfolio. Controlling conditions allows us to avoid plagiarism and assure that the essays can be scored holistically. Common essay scores range from 2 through 8, the sum of two independent readings on 1 to 4 scale. Scores of 6 and higher signal success on the essay. Before scoring the essays, we complete a norming session using benchmark essays to ensure all readers are working with same general standards.

Students understand that the common essay represents an “objective” evaluation of their writing. Instructors cannot score their own students’ common essays, nor can they challenge the score awarded the essay by the two anonymous evaluators. However, students do not need to earn any particular score in order to pass the course. We believe no single piece of writing adequately represents a student’s writing ability. It follows, then, that no single score should determine whether a student passes or fails the course.

In most instances the common essay experience confirms GAs’ sense of program standards. We encourage GAs to read and score their own students’ essays after the holistic scoring session in order to detect and understand anomalies. They find that the two other scorers evaluate their students at roughly the same level they have, raising everyone’s confidence level.

We work to show both students and GAs that evaluation is not arbitrary or unhealthfully subjective. The common essay, along with the portfolio evaluation collaborative exercise allows all of us, administrators and instructors, to articulate and enforce the program’s standards.

Opening Pandora’s Box

As we mentioned earlier, though we take great pride in our training program, we knew it was not working as well as it could. We wondered why and determined that we had violated TQM’s first principle. Rather than inviting GAs to help establish goals and thereby come to own them, we provided all the values, goals, and practice. We did not invite GAs to shape or endorse the program. This is particularly true of the evaluation scheme. The portfolio controls the program. The system works well as long as everyone understands and endorses the values.

There’s the rub. Our program and our training reflect our best sense of *how students learn to write*. We hold this value to such a degree that we disregard how individual teachers might best teach writing. We devote most of our energies to explaining to new staff how the various elements of the program work. Everything turns back onto itself. The training is self-reflective, in a negative sense. We stress the program, capital P, to such a degree that it assumes a mythical identity. Our bulky 200-page-plus program training manual has come to be known as the “bible.” We have never been comfortable with this reference. The manual originated as an effort to document effective teaching practice. Over time, however, it became an oppressive contract prescribing and proscribing instructor practice. The program had become dogmatic.

The bible metaphor underscores the problem of authority and control through the whole program. Concerning the common essay’s role in the overall evaluation scheme, we would regularly confront certain questions and objections. New GAs, perhaps reflecting the attitudes of their students, would question the value of such an elaborate procedure that didn’t have an *absolute*

value in determining the grade. Without absolute value, the common essay seemed to have an ambiguous purpose. Such ambiguity could affect performance, both by students preparing their essays and by GAs scoring them. The whole process could be skewed if only a few of the participants do not take the exercise seriously.

Because the program philosophy had so turned in on itself, we were unable to “hear” these questions. We could only reiterate, for the thousandth time, how the common essay fits into the program and what a good program we had. When GAs did value the common essay, they did so because they had assumed the ethos of the program. Some may have merely succumbed to indoctrination.

What happens when a GA decides that she does not “buy” the common essay? What happens when she informs her students that they will write the essay as a program requirement but that she will not count the scores? Many of her students will dismiss the essay, skewing the results of the entire process. One such GA, asked to defend her action since it influenced the results of the entire process and thus had an impact on every student, offered a refreshingly direct response. She said that she had done right by her students, evaluating them fairly on what she valued, and that she didn’t care about the impact on others and the program. She implied as well that for administration to think that she was the only subversive in the group was naive, that the “program” was not held sacrosanct through the entire GA corps, that resistance was significant, a Pandora’s Box waiting to be opened. Should we keep the box closed by invoking even more administrative control or should we invite those spectres to join a conversation?

Regardless of our response, the incident exposed the problem of alienation and lack of empowerment, something that from a TQM perspective could have been easily predicted. No participation, no stake, no individual responsibility for organizational quality. In some respects we had forced some GAs to this extreme response by preventing them from exercising any agency.

The Trainers Retrained: The Teaching Forum

TQM encourages us to continuously examine all elements of the training program, so we began to look more deeply in the box. A major goal of our training is introducing new GAs to the discipline of rhetoric, offering them membership in this scholarly community. We use a sequence of assignments in the pedagogy course to accomplish this end. The sequence of assignments encourages but does not require an ongoing focus on one particular pedagogical problem or issue. The best projects, however, do result from focusing on a specific problem through the course. We encourage such a focus through conferences, project proposals, and project updates embedded in the sequence. The assignment is tightly sequenced and structured, reflecting the clear value we place on top-down control. Here control serves professionalism, getting new

GAs on track from a programmatic perspective and helping them find a niche in the discipline.

Students become familiar with research tools, such as scholarly journals, and complete a professional book review involving a literature search. They also complete a research project culminating in a professional quality essay, targeted at a specific journal for publication, and presented orally as a scholarly paper in "Symposia" at the end of the term. The point is to share information that will allow everyone to teach the course, to do their "job," more effectively the next time. The problem is that the "job" itself, as detailed on the syllabus and through the course assignments and requirements, cannot be negotiated.

Examining the symposia through TQM lenses indicates they are aptly, if ironically, named. The term invokes a Socratic air. Just as the dialogues dramatically portray Plato driving his opponent further and further into confusion so Plato can achieve crystal clarity at the end, so were the 571 Symposia designed to take the new GAs from confusion to understanding within the program's boundaries. Through symposia new GAs earned our imprimatur.

The research project directs students to investigate a particular pedagogical issue, achieve a level of expertise, and offer instruction about the issue to all subsequent GAs. The latter purpose was served through the "571 Binders," in which all the research projects were collected and made available in the department's library.

Ideally, the research project originates in a specific problem a GA is having while teaching the course. Given the normative influence of the syllabus and program training, the assignment is essentially remedial. The program cannot be broken, so the GA must be broken. To begin the assignment, a student must reason: "what am I not doing very well? The program includes it, so it must have value. Obviously, the scholarship will support the program and offer a solution to the problem. I will review the scholarship, find the solution, and offer it to all the future incompetents who, like me, may have problems in the same area." The message is not a healthy one.

Revision: Symposia Become Conversations

Our need for control was alienating some GAs and limiting the creativity of others. Our good intentions resulted in wasting too much of the potential of our staff. TQM principles helped us understand the problem, and they suggest a solution. We need to encourage shared responsibility for quality by empowering all involved to act as stakeholders whose active participation can shape the curriculum. To accomplish these goals we will make two changes in the research project/symposia assignment.

The first change will invite all new GAs to share responsibility for quality. We will describe the research project from the outset as a *program critique*. Rather than devoting all energy to convergence within the program structure, our goal will be to encourage new GAs to place themselves in relation to current

program structure but to develop an innovation, something not included within the program or an approach different from current recommended practice, that reflects their individual values, goals, and emphases. For example, a new GA with a creative writing concentration might design ways to incorporate imaginative writing exercises in her course.

Our purpose is to provide a sense of ownership for every instructor. Starting from scratch to build consensus over the entire set of program values and goals, while desirable, is not feasible. The revised approach represents a compromise where the new GA is required to actively engage the program, show initiative, and to exercise some control. Each new GA must describe what she is doing differently, build a scholarly rationale for the innovation, test and evaluate the results, and recommend whether and how the innovation should be integrated into the program.

Given a degree of freedom and control over some aspect of her work, the new GA is more likely to support other aspects of the program. Working to accomplish both individual and program goals requires GAs to pay close attention and develop reflective discipline, thereby assuming more personal responsibility for total quality in their classrooms.

The second change will empower GAs, making them stakeholders actively involved in program design. Rather than the implicitly remedial symposia, ENGL 571 will now include a "Teaching Forum." The new GA has defined herself both in relation to and against some aspect of the program, then developed an innovation embodying her individual goal in practice and tested and illustrated her success in terms of accomplishing that goal. Now the stage is set for introducing the specific goal into the general conversation of the program.

She will do this through the Teaching Forum, the academic adaptation of the quality circle, a common TQM practice. In contrast to Symposia, the Teaching Forum is open-ended, a place for introducing, discussing, and debating potential curricular changes. In a series of presentations during the semester following the work in ENGL 571, each new GA will bring her experience to the whole group of writing teachers, including GAs, instructors, and regular faculty. She will explain her innovation and discuss its success. She will lead a conversation to determine whether her innovation should be incorporated into the program, offered as an alternative activity for use by individuals so inclined, reconceived and retested, or abandoned. Based on this conversation, the innovation may become the subject of further development and implementation. Details for this process still need to be worked out, and, given our shifting attitude toward control, we will invite the GAs themselves to help manage the process. We must be careful not to re-dogmatize the program through the Teaching Forum and recreate the same alienating power currently exercised through the training program and manual.

Conclusion: Closing the Outcomes Assessment Circle

A new GA's participation in the Teaching Forum as a proponent for change closes the outcomes assessment circle by articulating programmatic and individual values and goals, and testing and refining them in the most dynamic way possible. Most important, we will have completed the feedback loop and recognized and begun to remedy a weakness in our program. Just as quality is neither a subject nor an object but an inter-relationship, so is responsibility more vital and productive when shared between program and teachers.

We want to avoid one of the accusations we raised against Bleich. We want to establish a direct link between process and product. Thus, we look for the Teaching Forum to have a concrete impact on student writing. Given that the project requires GAs to complete a sophisticated research project and to theorize the role research plays in learning and teaching, we expect them to do a better job teaching research to their own students. They will pay more attention to negotiating meaningful topics involving concrete projects directly relevant to the student. Experiencing some of the same problems as their students, though at a different level, they will be more prepared to help students manage the project toward success. Even if all they do is communicate an enthusiasm for research, their students should take the research project more seriously and thus perform better.

After allowing the Teaching Forum experiment to mature for a few semesters, we will look closely both at attitudes of students and teachers and performance as represented in the researched essays collected in the portfolio. We will develop primary trait scales to examine the several outcomes and values mentioned above, concrete relevant projects, effective research management skills, and enthusiasm. Just as the Teaching Forum completes the feedback loop for staff development, so will examining the researched essays determine whether and how the project is affecting student outcomes.

In the end, outcomes assessment must consider more than specific student behaviors. While measuring whether students have met particular objectives by the end of the course has value, the measurements do not necessarily reveal the origin of problems or suggest solutions. We must also consider teacher attitudes and behaviors and how they affect the quality of the final product. Effective outcomes assessment will help us not only evaluate the product but also suggest how to improve the process along the way. The TQM lens requires us to look at all the elements of a transaction, and the new GA is key.

Note

1. Collaborative projects require a weaving of voices within an essay. In this case, "I" refers to Burnham, the director of the program, and "we," when not a reference to the whole community of WPAs, signals the shared experience of Burnham and Nims, the assistant director.

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