The development of quality management tools in business studies education

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Abstract

This paper reports on one aspect of a HEFCE funded project – the Quality in Business Education (QuBE) consortium project. Consortium partners have developed various diagnostic tools to help those managing business schools to reflect upon their quality processes and hence to improve them. The development and testing of these tools fits within an action research framework. Three of the tools are described in detail showing how different approaches to experiential learning can be helpful in this area.

Keywords quality management tools, action research, QuBE

1. Introduction

A concern with Quality Assurance and Enhancement in UK higher education is increasingly evident as enrolments increase in the 18+ age cohort. Inspection of programmes by the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) used a *fitness for purpose* model in which programmes were evaluated by reference to their own stated objectives as well as paying due regard to national benchmarks in each discipline. However in the review of the business and management subject in 2000-2001 quality management and enhancement was found to be the weakest aspect of the provision. Supported by HEFCE under its FDTL5 scheme, a consortium of UK university business schools is undertaking a project entitled Quality in Business Education (QuBE) with the aim of improving quality management. More recently, attention has moved on within the sector to consider more significant change, to achieve an *excellence* rather than *fitness for purpose* level of quality. For some this will be achieved by adopting *top down* models such as the EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) excellence model, suitably adapted for higher education, although whether this will prove to be a panacea is debateable.

Several quality management methodologies and frameworks aimed at improving and transforming HE institutions are being implemented. Many are supported by toolkits. The tools they provide, however, usually concentrate upon the specifics of processes and procedures. There is also a need for tools that address the improvement of the quality culture through self-reflection by participants. One of the activities of the QUBE consortium is to “develop a range of awareness-raising, diagnostic and problem-solving tools and methods to cater for local issues faced by institutions and the diversity of their base positions in QME “ (QuBE 2006). In this paper the authors report on tools that have been developed thus far and relate these to the possibility of an ongoing process of quality improvement by means of action research.

2. Improving Quality

Improvement in quality management processes in universities can be thought of as occurring in two stages. Firstly there is a need to achieve a ‘fitness for purpose’ level of quality, to meet the standard required by the UK QAA. This was the standard of quality management and enhancement that a significant number of business schools and departments failed to meet at subject review in 2001. Beyond this there is a stage of striving to achieve excellence. The first stage is prescriptive, in that there are clear models of good practice to achieve that standard. The second requires a more thoroughgoing commitment to change and it is at this stage that an action research approach may be adopted. One can consider this in terms of Kurt Lewin's Change Theory as described by Schein (1996), which we briefly describe here. For present purposes the relevant part of that theory is the initial unfreezing phase. This is thought of as consisting of three interacting processes: disconfirmation arousing "survival anxiety", "learning anxiety" and the creation of psychological safety. Most, perhaps all, managers of business schools will be subject to disconfirmation of their own and others aspirations as they struggle to meet a plethora of targets and objectives, some of their own making and others generated for them by institutional and national requirements. Some, perhaps only a few, will have "learning anxiety", by which is meant a reluctance to enter a learning or change process, through fear of losing effectiveness or self-esteem. It is to overcome learning anxiety that we need to create psychological safety, by which is meant the use of tactics and methods such as working in groups and splitting the learning process into manageable steps that allow people to proceed with confidence.

So the transformation of quality in a business school can be thought of as action research. The learning and diagnostic tools described below would be used at the unfreezing stage. Their primary aim would be to encourage reflection upon aspects of the development and operation of business schools. It is through this reflection that any learning anxiety is overcome. Then the use of the tools should create psychological safety by demonstrating that, either individually or in groups, there are ways of addressing the problems that have lead to the original survival anxiety. The tools are not meant to be set in stone. They can readily be developed and adapted to the needs of individual business schools as improvement through action research continues. They could also serve another purpose. As exemplars of innovative learning methods they could be the basis of a redesign of the business school curriculum and its delivery.

The tools have been chosen so that, within the framework outlined above, they illustrate a variety of approaches. *Dialogue sheets* are a way of generating a conversation about quality matters in which all the participants take part. *The minutes tool* emphasises reflection upon the effectiveness of quality processes over which one has control. *The jigsaw method* gets people collaborating as they explore the design of an individual deliverable.

3. The tools

Before describing the tools in detail we note some general issues that apply to them all. van Ments (1990) points out "the fuzzy area between simulation and games and case studies on the one hand and experiential exercises on the other". Both types of activity are well known in business studies education and these tools have elements of both in them. Although they might be viewed as case studies their impact will arise from the reflection when they are undertaken as experiential exercises (Kolb 1984). Van Ments also points out the considerable time and resources need for this type of activity. It is certainly the case that these tools took significant resources to develop. They can however be adapted and reused with little effort. More importantly it was an objective that they would take only a limited time to complete, so that a busy manager could readily try them.

3.1 Dialogue Sheets

The term "dialogue sheet" is commonly used in a variety of educational contexts but here we use it to refer to a method of encouraging student reflection developed at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm (Blomqvist 2003). There it was used to encourage first year students to be positive about learning with their peers and to reflect upon what they were trying to achieve by that learning. The method requires the production of a large A0 sheet, the dialogue sheet, around the periphery of which are written a series of questions and tasks. This is the tool. Around it sit some 6 - 8 people. Each person is the owner of the question or task that directly faces them. They read it out to start that part of the conversation. The owner records the results of this on their part of the sheet. This arrangement helps to ensure that everyone at some point takes part in the conversation, that it is not monopolised by the few. The aim is that there should be a joint discussion, not necessarily consensual, that helps participants to reflect on the topics.

The dialogue sheet method may be viewed as a particular example of the kind of experiential learning called conversational learning (Baker *et. al*. 2005). Experiential Learning Theory was extensively explored in Kolb (1984). In describing conversational learning Baker *et. al.* draw a distinction between conversation and dialogue. Dialogue is seen, etymologically, as grounded in 'opposing voices in search of truth' whereas conversation is a more collaborative activity. For this reason the 'dialogue sheet' method might have better been named as the 'conversation sheet' method but nomenclature now seems to be firmly established.

The method has been adapted by Holtham and Courtney (2006) to provide a diagnostic tool for the QuBE project. In their version of the tool there are 10 questions and tasks which included: (See Holtham 2006 for a copy of their sheet)

- '"Research rather than teaching excellence is the key to career success." Is this why there are so many barriers to successful pedagogic innovation in business schools?'
- "Compared to any other discipline, UK Business Schools are amongst the most competitive with each other. One result is that Business Schools have failed to harness their COLLECTIVE strength in both teaching and research. By contrast the medical profession, faced with the same problem 20 years ago, decided to collaborate and as a result has gained resources, not least from the business disciplines"

Two of the questions make reference to other material. One of these questions refers to a series of 12 words/phrases situated around the border of the sheet. These are succinct prompts such as "Expected versus actual student experience" and "Leadership versus management". One of these is chosen by the team for general discussion. The other question refers to a list of quotes on the subject of quality from well-known sources. They each pose a dilemma in stark terms; for example:

- "Most of us are willing to change not because we see the light but because we feel the heat"

Again the group makes a choice of the quotes it wants to discuss. It can also make up its own quotes for other groups to discuss. These last two questions vary the tasks for the group.

A full session would take half a day so this is a fairly extensive exercise. It is expected that for this input of time the participants would gain a considerable insight into their own approach to a considerable number of quality issues. Their tangible result would be a dialogue sheet upon which they had all made a contribution.

3.2 The Minutes Tool

For this tool the background is the supposition that there are many aspects of the working of business schools that are seen as acceptable. The practices and processes involved are well established, indeed may be hallowed by length of usage. The institution or some external agency may prescribe or recommend an action of the kind that is practised. In these circumstances the actions are undertaken almost for the sake of form, or with little expectation that they will be helpful. Disconfirmation, in the sense of Schein, is not high. With many sources of concern in the area of quality, the business school manager perhaps concentrates on the larger issues, such as the establishment of overall quality frameworks. The actual quality processes are not examined in detail. Although there may be a sense of doubt as to their effectiveness, action to make process improvements is given a low priority. The tool described in this section causes the manager to reflect upon the working of one commonly adopted procedure for involving students in the work of a business school. It is aimed at making manifest latent “survival anxiety” about the effectiveness of a school’s mechanisms for engaging students.

It is generally accepted that determining student views on their courses and responding to those views is a vital part of course operation particularly as emphasis is increasingly placed on the notion of the student as consumer. There are several ways of establishing student opinion, both formal and informal. One of the most venerated is the staff student committee. These operate in most business schools, either with one committee for all courses, or a committee per course or group of courses. They are seen as having several advantages (Brennan 2004). They constitute a clear means of communication between staff and students in which issues can be discussed openly and staff can gauge student opinion and determine what needs to be done to respond to it. However, although there seems to have been no detailed investigation of the deficiencies of these committees reported in the literature our investigation on student involvement for the QuBE project (Rush 2006b) has shown that in practice their operation could often be significantly improved. From a significant list of possible deficiencies we may note such examples as:

- meeting relatively infrequently;
- not being well attended because staff and students do not see them as having a significant impact;
- receiving matters that should have been dealt with directly and only reported to the committee as action taken and no feedback being given on the actions taken as a consequence of student comments until the next meeting, if then.

To get the business school manager reflecting on the effectiveness of their staff-student committee a tool has been developed in the form of a case study. Case studies are well known in business education and are used to engage the attention of students in material that is new to them. They are often quite lengthy, requiring several hours or even days. By contrast the case study here is very short, is for staff and is aimed at one single aspect of the day to day operation of business schools – the staff student committee – with which most staff will feel completely familiar. So the task uses a document that almost all staff will have encountered, although one suspects most will not have given it a great deal of attention – the minutes of the committee. There are three components to the tool (Rush 2006a). The first is a short introduction, setting the context. This is important because the case study poses a dilemma from the point of view of a business school manager with responsibility for quality. Is it worthwhile to put effort into improving the staff student committee, especially if that is at the expense of other quality management developments? The second component is the minutes document itself. This is a set of minutes from one meeting at a fictional UK business school. They are meant to read as many another set of minutes does i.e. they are turgid and uninspiring. Finally there are comments to help a facilitator who is using the tool as a basis for group discussion, or those who are trying the case study individually.

It is the detail in the minutes that reveals how well or badly this committee is functioning. For example the date of the meeting taken together with that of the previous meeting, reveals that it meets only twice a year. This probably means that there is not a lot of continuity between meetings and they are not seen as important. It is intended that noticing an issue of this kind will help the reader to reflect upon the operation of their own staff student committee. The minutes contain clues to several other issues such as the absence of representation from significant students cohorts, the part-timers, and the absence of a significant member of staff, the dissertations tutor. It may well be that such is the diversity amongst business schools that there are clues to issues that were not even seen as such by the authors.

The approach taken here would seem to be one that could be readily applied to other areas than staff student committees. It is after all getting managers to act as auditors and then to apply the lessons learned to their own practice. Any activity that generates a document trail such as committee minutes, module reports, briefing papers and web sites could be the basis of a tool of this type.

3.3 The Jigsaw method

The jigsaw method is a technique of cooperative learning that was first introduced by Elliot Aronson as a way of defusing racial tension in recently desegregated classrooms (Aronson 2006). When using the method, students are organised into groups, possibly chosen for their diverse backgrounds, of 4 or 5. Typically the group is given a topic to learn or task to attempt and members of the group are tested on what they have achieved at the end of the learning period. What is different about the jigsaw method is that each group member is allocated a specific subtopic of the overall topic. The group member then concentrates on learning about their specific subtopic. After a while all the individuals from the different groups studying the same subtopic are brought together so that they jointly improve their knowledge. This is the experts groups stage. When this experts session has finished the original groups are reformed and each student instructs the other group members in their specialist subtopic. Finally the test takes place. The method has some clear advantages. Each team member is forced to make a contribution. There is no hiding by getting someone else in the group to do their work. More than this is that each member is forced to depend upon the work of others if they are to do well in the final test. Cooperative working is emphasised as team members use the learning achieved by their fellow members for their own benefit.

This method has been adapted by Holtham and Dove (Holtham and Dove 2006) to produce a learning tool for the QuBE project. They have produced a tool which can be used with academics to promote quality enhancement and with students as part of their subject learning. Their design required each participant to be given a card at the start of a session. On the card would be information about two small aspects of the subject under consideration. The task would be for the groups to work out cooperatively the nature of the subject.

The particular subject chosen for pilot use of the tool was an innovative MBA course entitled “The Business Mystery” that had recently been delivered. This was a course without lecturing, so the objective of the jigsaw learning was to introduce the concept and practice of courses without lectures. It was done in this way. The course was of 5 weeks duration. During its delivery comments had been collected each week from various participants and these had been classified under 4 stakeholder roles:

Role A: Satisfied Student – from student feedback

Role B: Facilitator – from comments made during the course by the academic team

Role C: Sceptical student – from student feedback

Role D: Business Person sitting in and sympathetic to approach – mostly from facilitators on the course

This provided enough information to create 20 cards, 4 for each week corresponding to the 4 roles. These cards were then labelled with their week number and role letter. Upon each card was a comment produced in the week by that role. Those for the student role were particularly realistic as they were taken from actual student comments.

The jigsaw game proceeded as follows. The participants were given the rules of the game explaining that the context was a new module; for this they had to deduce what was distinctive about it and also the roles of the 4 stakeholder groups. There were 4 stages:

Stage 1 Each person is given a card and asked to join up with all the other people in the room with the same letter. They were asked to work out their common stakeholder role.

Stage 2 Now all the people with the same number are asked to join together to work out the purpose of their week.

Stage 3 The whole group combines to work out what this module is about in terms of its learning objectives and outcomes.

Stage 4 The debriefing.

When the game was piloted with academic staff the first stage was done well and roles were quickly established, although a few people were at a loss with the term “stakeholder”. The next stage was more difficult and for some groups facilitators had to point to clues in the text on the cards. The difficulties that some people encountered might be thought of in terms of Pask’s (1975) “serialist-holist-versatile” categorisation of learning styles. The holists would be happy to switch rapidly from topic to topic as this game requires, whereas the serialists wanting a more ordered sequencing of the material would be less happy. It may be that for an audience of university tutors, a little more structure could be introduced to meet the needs of serialists. Feedback on the content of each week was then given and this was followed by a discussion and debriefing.

There are several ways in which this game is relevant to enhancing quality. The form of the game requires that participants concentrate upon detailed aspects of the quality of some educational activity, a module in the example here, and take into account the viewpoints of differing stakeholders. By doing this it is hoped that people will bring this wider perspective to their own development of learning tasks. The game also constitutes an example of a rather different kind of delivery technique that should be applicable in many business subjects.

4. Conclusions

Only three tools have been described in this paper. Others have been developed or are in course of development. The common strand that runs through all of them is the element of self reflection. What is being said here is that the change which is needed to make significant improvements in quality can come from within a business school. It is not necessary to have the spur of an institution wide application of a quality framework before there is quality enhancement. We believe the use of such tools as those described here can play a significant part in such endeavours. It should be possible to develop the tools and adapt them to a variety of uses.

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