

Quality Assurance and Conflict in Education Organizations

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Abstract. Quality Assurance in Education is there to validate the accreditation and implementation of learning to ensure that quality standards of provision are constantly reviewed and benchmarked against national or organizational standards. Defining quality is always a challenge and evaluating whether quality provision is then delivered is somewhat subjective even if clear criteria are in place.

This paper looks at:

- the challenges faced in terms of quality assurance activity, specifically audits, in terms of an evaluation of some of the challenges noted in South Africa,
- when conflict between the regulatory authority is noted with the educational organizations,
- where conflict arises within the organization itself as result of quality assurance activity
- the role and behavior of the quality assurance auditor

The role of the Quality Assurance auditor is to ensure that standards are met within organizations. Quality Assurance auditors interface with the educational organizations and act, in their capacity auditors, as the extension of the regulatory body. This paper considers how evaluating this role and its various functions can create an awareness of quality assurance to improve the perceptions of quality in educational organizations.

Keywords: quality assurance conflict, criterion-referenced assessment, audit.

1. Introduction

Organizations strive for quality nowadays and in many cases use it as a means of differentiating products and services from one another. However, quality and maintaining quality requires continuous work and a structured process. In education, with the additional burden of regulatory requirements, quality assurance requires amongst other things a distinct understanding of conflict and specifically organizational conflict. As quality assurance includes a cycle of evaluation, whether it be internal or external, there is always an opportunity to identify improvement, or in extreme cases non-compliance with subsequent consequences.

In organizations not linked to regulatory requirements, internal policy and practice is used to evaluate the efficacy of the delivery of learning. However, in a regulated space, educational regulatory authorities will normally document and require compliance to pre-agreed criteria. Most regulatory authorities go about defining what quality or a quality system is, in South Africa it has been defined as, “quality assurance, quality management and accreditation are not things or products; rather, quality is a process” (SAQA, 2001a, p.14).

If one then includes criterion-referenced assessment, a system to link learners achievements to specific criteria and thus provide a more thorough feedback mechanism as is done in South Africa, a quality assurance framework is required. This framework is beneficial as the final outcome of the system namely assessments offers the opportunity for evaluating not only the learning outcomes but also “[a]ny criterion-referenced assessment seeks to align objectives or aims and assessment tasks, but a fully aligned system additionally tunes the teaching methods, climate, institutional procedures and so on, to the objectives” (Biggs, 2001, p.226).

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2. Quality Assurance and Conflict

2.1. Understanding Quality Assurance Policies in South Africa

Organizations that choose to be private educational providers in South Africa are required to follow national policy developed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) entitled *Criteria and Guidelines for Training Providers* (SAQA, 2001b). Specifically the principles of Total Quality Management are considered and more specifically in terms of quality assurance and education retrospective quality assurance is used “Retrospective QA looks back to what has already been done and makes a summative judgment against external standards. The agenda is managerial rather than academic, with accountability as a high priority” (Biggs, 2001, p.222).

Quality Audits are conducted by quality assurance auditors who are required to consider what the purpose of an audit is in terms of an educational institute, which as per SAQA “means the process of examining the indicators which show the degree of excellence achieved” (SAQA, 2001a, p. 47). This choice to be a private educational provider, as well as the interactions between the various quality assurance and monitoring functions, creates significant organizational conflict between the organization representatives and the quality assurance evaluators.

Quality Assurance creates multiple conflicts within organizations:

- It creates conflict within teams; with individuals across the organization as quality assurance effectively involves an audit and a finding. This kind of output makes people feel defensive and it creates a sense of judgment.
- It creates conflict with the organizational representatives and the auditor, as if the auditor wishes to use power dynamics they can negatively, and secondly if the organizational representative feels defensive the engagement can be volatile.

The organizational culture being evaluated is very specifically not a singular homogenous organization, which interacts within itself, but a regulatory body that has relationships with various stakeholders, most of which are training providers being regulated. It is helpful to use Deal and Kennedy’s concept of “process” organizations, when considering a regulatory authority and the stakeholders that engage with it, as the definition of “process” organizations notes that “[t]hese organizations are highly bureaucratic and face few risks; they implement standard processes over which they have little or no control and will continue to exist no matter what the outcome as long as the processes continue to be needed” (Simpson and van Luinen, 2009, p. 13). Furthermore, the organization could be seen as a task based, hierarchical structure oriented space, or Eiffel Tower (role oriented culture) as coined by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner in Simpson and van Luinen (2009, pp. 21-23), and “[a]voiding a dispute is probably a good idea in this organization, and accommodating to leadership instructions will also maintain the organizationally- defined and appropriate relationship” (Simpson and van Luinen, 2009, pg. 13). The system, considering system theory, is not in balance and at any point can malfunction depending on the power relationship and conflict scenario.

The organizational culture is therefore always going to be a ‘power-based’ relationship as one stakeholder evaluates the efficacy of delivery and reports on it. However, one has to consider the individuals that are part of the organization, the quality assurance auditors, who are sent to do the evaluations and effectively evaluate the quality of provision, using prescribed criterion, although making a somewhat subjective outcome in the process, but which is binding and seen as an outcome of the regulatory body.

It could be assumed that should an auditor wish to use power, in their personal capacity, they could evaluate very strictly against the criterion, hiding behind the guise of the criterion, which directly represent the regulatory body. It would seem that the auditor holds “power,” as they evaluate the quality of education and training delivered by training providers and make a judgment about their accreditation and endorsing learner achievements.

The audits themselves are problematic as evidence is produced, discussions are held, and training providers’ request concessions and the regulator has to maintain standards. Conflicts arise, as the process could be seen as subjective and should the auditor wish to consider power, they could make the process difficult. There is very little opportunity for reflexive thinking, or self-evaluation. As a result tensions arise because, if framed and applied incorrectly, any quality assurance framework can be seen as rigid and

inflexible, and parties wishing to understand it feel alienated, without a way to ask questions in a safe and constructive manner.

The type of conflict that arises is when the training provider feels the quality assurance framework, or the auditor has used criterion against them, without an opportunity to clarify statements or consider alternative evidence. The training provider then considers how to re-assert power and the most common tool used, in this relationship, is to consider the funding model of the regulatory authority. The training providers in most instances are also the levy paying organizations that fund the regulatory body. During quality assurance audits, if training providers feel they are being challenged, or that the outcome may not be favorable, there have been instances where they have asserted power by circumnavigating the quality assurance process and getting senior role players in the organization to contact the head of the regulatory authority to sway the outcome in their favor. Although it would seem that this kind of practice would not be considered, it sometimes is, and a request is made to the quality assurance division to reconsider the outcome, or the auditor is replaced. Therefore, the conflict is two-part: it is between the role player in the audit event conducting the audit, as well as between the organization that the auditor represents, in this case the regulatory authority and the levy paying stakeholder.

Communication and power are interlinked, as power is used through communication and therefore it is critical in this relationship, as it has the opportunity of diffusing tensions or the opposite, in which conflict can escalate. Therefore, it is apt to say, that communication in the organizational relationship can become power based, if the training provider indicates that it does not take the audit seriously and therefore may use power to influence it; alternatively, it could be used by the auditor against the training provider in a manner which does not consider any alternative viewpoints and is strictly based on a checklist and criterion. Communication has to be seen as the opportunity for encouraging reflexive practice from both sides, as “Reflexivity is a “critical awareness, description, and way of being with others”” (Littlejohn & Domnici, 2007, p.186). This act of being aware allows for an engagement which breaks down the power based relationship and encourages a new “productive” space.

One of the biggest challenges to quality assurance with private training provision is that the organization must make a profit while still meeting quality assurance standards. It is ironic that an institution that is required to disseminate and empower learning, must also find ways and means to sustain itself. These challenges have been noted in research on quality and private provision which notes, “[h]ere commercial priorities and administrative structures have been imposed on institutions whose original function is to create and to disseminate knowledge because of a fundamental and intrinsic need to understand the world” (Biggs, 2001, p.235). This therefore creates a pressure within the organization as it focus is no longer on learning but sustainability.

The conflict arises when short cuts are made in order to meet profitability at the expense of quality assurance. As noted, the regulatory authority and its agents evaluate according to criteria and the education provider’s representatives have to at times be involved in site visits and face the auditor when they were not complicit or even in agreement to the decisions that were made in terms of meeting profitability requirements over quality assurance practice.

Quality Assurance Auditing conducted on behalf of an Education Authority can result in various organizational conflicts arising, through engagement with documents, records, systems and human resources. The act of conducting an audit makes stakeholders feel uncomfortable and judged, which results in behavior which could be expressed in defensive, child like, laissez-faire or even hostile behavior by the organization to the auditor.

Communication between the educational representatives and the auditor can be harsh, heated or even abusive, as the defensive mechanisms force either party to save face either for the organization, in terms of the organizational representatives, or for the regulatory authority, in terms of the quality assurance auditor. As Biggs notes “[d]istorted priorities are a major source of nonalignment” (2001, p.234), and if communication is not clear, then very quickly the priorities of both sides become distorted and emotions challenge the quality assurance visit in general.

The challenge from both sides is that the professionalism aspect is not always in place. There are no guidelines in terms of how to deal with the human or emotional aspect of quality assurance. There is no training in terms of how to diffuse situations, ensure productivity in audits or even to consider that quality assurance needs to be a 360-degree process. With all of these challenges noted one needs to consider the purpose of quality assurance, which is to maintain standards. One of the definitions of quality assurance in education is that it must be “Quality as fit for purpose” (Biggs, 2001, p.221) however, in order to be fit for purpose there needs to be clear guidelines on how to encourage conflict and manage it accordingly.

2.2. Analysis of Conflict and Suggested Improvements

As private provision is much needed in South Africa in order to help support public educational institutions in terms of provision, the approach to the issue of quality management needs to be dealt with on two levels. Each is explained then discussed.

Quality Management processes and procedures, including minimum requirements need to be carefully documented and explained in capacity building sessions, in which the finance and marketing staff of organizations are encouraged to attend. In effect, this process would encourage buy in from the “numbers” people in order to understand the issues at hand. This would help two-fold- firstly, it would help those responsible for profitability understand the challenges that those responsible within the quality assurance division are responsible for; secondly, it could be used as the “information sharing” tool for the regulatory body so that excuses could not be made about not knowing what the requirements are. Those that attend the workshop could sign a declaration of understanding and commitment to quality implementation within organizations.

Garvin (1993) considers what it is to build a learning organization in his work entitled “Building a Learning Organization”. His key findings are amongst other things, that learning organizations are not only idealistic but can be realized. It would be helpful to encourage through the capacity building about encouraging and rewarding those organizations that follow this model of creating a learning culture. As the private education providers are already in the business of delivery of learning, the learning culture directly matches their output. Specifically Garvin (1993) refers to “benchmarking” as a tool to create learning as all those involved in the process are able to participate in the process to understand and document the requirements, measurement etc. linked to the benchmark. As the criteria have already been developed for regulatory requirements, these can further explored within the capacity building workshops to help organizations realize the requirements to meet the criteria through problem solving how their organization operates, “[t]he greatest benefits come from studying practices, the way that work gets done rather than results, and from involving line managers in the process” (French et. al, 2005, p.282).

As the role of the auditor can be seen as a power based position, a set of guidelines based on best practice should be developed and documented in a research paper which considers audit behavior and the effect it has on employees within an organization, and to the organization at large. This guideline will then be shared with the Education Authority in the hopes of encouraging training of auditors to better understand the psychology of those being audited.

It is the second point that requires more training and research, namely the emotional/human element in the auditing process. Incorrectly reading the behavior or reacting to defensive behavior can result in conflict flaring up and therefore it is important to further interrogate how to address this.

Although financial auditing is different, the quality assurance process still requires its role players to act as auditors and Ng & Tan consider findings into behavior which note: “We find that authoritative guidance availability has a greater effect on auditors’ perceived negotiation outcome when the clients audit committee is ineffective than when it is effective. Similarly, audit committee effectiveness has a greater effect on auditors’ perceived negotiation outcome in the absence of authoritative guidance than in its presence” (2003, p.802).

Evaluating the relationships and organizational tensions, a concept of “constructive facework” as noted by Littlejohn and Domnici (2007) is beneficial in considering solutions to this problem. The nature of the problem will possibly remain, but the engagement of role players and stakeholders is key to the solution. If the auditor considers that rather than giving power or considering an assumption of power, the auditor can

diffuse tensions by acknowledging that the training provider is a partner, who has a “face” which is a public domain based idea, which is linked to their profile and ultimately the organization’s public relations face. By noting that “[c]onstructive facework is designed to build or maintain the face of other people” (Littlejohn & Domnici, 2007, p.193), and engaging in a manner which helps the other party (training provider) understand that they will be able to keep their image if they work as a partner with quality assurance, creates a shared common goal which is in the interests of the learners in the system.

By communicating with the stakeholders at the beginning of the sessions around the shared interest of quality assurance, in effect a new “productive” space is created which allows “[n]ew patterns of communication that can transcend the stuck pattern and transform the relationship are necessary for movement toward the sphere of value” (Littlejohn & Domnici, 2007, p. 227). This changes the paradigm of communication, as the two parties are no longer seen as adversaries but rather as a joint force working together towards a common goal.

A second solution to the issue is to consider the idea of the “learning conversations” (Littlejohn and Domnici, 2007), which help to explore ideas and values, in a discussion format that allows each party to learn through the experience and thus again create a joint involvement towards a common goal. Through practical use of this concept, it has been possible to engage with training providers, in a constructive manner as the engagement process of “[l]earning conversations can change the relationship from adversarial to exploratory” (Littlejohn & Domnici, 2007, p. 228), which diffuses the need to find reasons not to work together.

Critical as noted in the process of evaluation is the criterion of what has to be evaluated. However, this has been used at times as a front for protecting the quality assurance process from the training provider, in terms of power-based interactions. Through the “learning conversation,” the criterion can be explained and explored in a way which allows the training provider to consider brainstorming ways of meeting them, or identifying alternative kinds of evidence which would not have been possible without the vehicle of the “learning conversation”:

“[L]earning conversations create opportunities to discuss powers and limits of a variety of perspectives...they can reveal and expose what each point of view might be able to achieve as well as what cannot be done” (Littlejohn & Domnici, 2007, p. 228).

As the quality assurance process will always result in an audit, either to validate current implementation or assessment practice, the role of the auditor is paramount. Research conducted by Biggs considers that it may be helpful to have a consultant acting in the role of the auditor, “an outside advisor who can visit the department and give all the advice and help that an external examiner can give, without the distortions created when examiners perceive their briefs as simply adjudicating the assessment of student products” (Biggs, 2001, p.230). By identifying the different kinds of psychology associated with audits, and ensuring that power is minimized in this process is a fundamental component of reducing conflict.

Quality assurance should not be used as a weapon nor should it be ignored; it should be used to create best practice and the issues that are noted linked to it namely profitability in the name of quality, and the psychology of the role players should be further explored to encourage information sharing which empowers all stakeholders in an organization.

3. Conclusion

Quality assurance is cyclical and allows or creates the opportunity for continuous review and can be a full 360-degree opportunity for all role players in the system. In order for a quality system to be successful it requires clear criteria and guidelines, but also requires sufficient capacitation, role definition and feedback mechanisms. This paper has considered the importance of a clear understanding of what quality is, but also considers both the role of quality auditors for a regulatory authority.

In conclusion, communication in a manner which encourages reflexive opportunities, creating a new way of communicating outside of the “process” driven organizations seems to be the most inclusive and productive manner in which to address conflict in a hierarchical and power based organization. The way in which the auditor creates a mirror to their own practice (reflexive opportunity), communication skills and the

manner and circumstances in which they evaluate the stakeholder's interaction (learning conversations) are the tools, which can ensure productivity of the system. It is imperative to include a reflexive component, which asks all parties to acknowledge their role in the process, to ensure that all sides are acknowledged and that praise is given for participation, language is changed to be more inclusive and supportive and to ensure that the negotiation moves towards the best outcome.

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