

HOW TO BE AWARE OF AND WORK TOGETHER ON AN INTRINSIC CULTURE OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AS A TEAM

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Abstract

After quality assurance, quality system and quality care, the latest ‘trend’ in education is working on quality culture. As the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (Dutch: Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen; OCW) writes in her letter to the Dutch Lower House: “It is the task of the school Board to ensure that all work on quality culture” [1]. Thus the QUAL4T2 project focuses on the improvement of the quality culture in teams. It is a follow-up to the QUAL4T project, which was focused on raising the quality awareness of individual teachers. Teachers not only highlighted the value of the first project, but also expressed the need for follow-up of the project in the final feedback they gave. QUAL4T pilots took place in The Netherlands, UK, Spain and Italy. Now, in QUAL4T2, partners provide several instruments gathered in a toolkit, which can help teacher teams to improve themselves. The toolkit is based on the outcomes of a questionnaire which was administered in organisations of five different countries, to get qualitative feedback from teams. They were also asked to reflect individually on the four quality portraits, as developed by The Dutch National Reference Point of European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (NLQAVET). The basis of this approach, which is now being piloted, is to think about quality. The teams themselves should develop awareness of their current quality culture and choose their focus points, based on their own outcomes of the questionnaire. This is strongly linked to thinking instruments such as “Peer to peer review” and “Giving effective feedback”.

Keywords: quality culture, quality assurance, quality portraits, NLQAVET, teams, education

1 INTRODUCTION

In every education team one can speak about a certain team culture, although team members may not even notice this; may not be aware of their culture. In this article we aim to focus on a specific culture of quality improvement, where team members are aware of what they want to be together; what their common vision is; what their mutual attitude towards their students is; what their attitude towards each other ought to be and what they aim to work on. In fact one could say that the team as a whole should have a quality culture in which they do the right things together, while working on continuous quality improvement.

Working on the quality culture starts with a certain awareness amongst all team members. To raise this awareness the partners of the QUAL4T2 project [2] have been using a questionnaire for team members to fill in individually.

2 METHODOLOGY

The national research reports and the European outcomes together with the results of these zero questionnaires have helped the partnership find the strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats teams in Europe face regarding their culture of quality improvement and strategic planning. Based on these outcomes we have developed a toolkit with instruments that can be used to improve the culture of quality improvement in a team. Both the SWOT analyses and the toolkit will be described in chapter 3.

3 RESULTS

The SWOT-analyses as published in the Transnational Research report [3] gave input for the development of tools and meetings:

A number of strengths were identified: Easy access to sources; Opportunities to learn through workshops, Seminars and Peer learning activities; Freedom in the choice of teaching methods; Annual cycles for planning analyses of the year results; Common use of Total Quality Management System (EFQM)

Weaknesses may be: Lack of permanent or full time teachers or continuous changes in staff members; Not a strong culture of quality in all the members of staff, especially teachers; Seen as tools mainly for management; Different concept of what a year plan is both in the countries and in the teams; The Check and the Act part of the PDCA cycle; Ownership of the team plan; Quality of evaluation and Feedback - how, frequency, when... ; Team members have different ideas about their team Quality culture within their own team; they often have different roles and expertise in the organization; Team leadership; Not every staff member shares the same Quality awareness within the same organization; Sometimes teachers lack knowledge about all the other necessary processes in their school; Lack of communication among all the interested parties, non-teaching staff included.

Opportunities are: Reference management models; Benchmarking; Support from the ministries of education; Accessible information; Help from good practices or experts; European projects results; National agency associations support; EQAVET support.

Threats may be: Changes in ISO standards; Different cultures of quality between countries; Digital professionalization of teacher

3.1 Zero-measuring of teams

A questionnaire on Quality Culture was delivered to different teams in each partner organization. This Questionnaire is part of the Quality toolkit. The results of the questionnaire have provided an overview on the current situation of the quality and will help the partnership work on the right topics for further quality improvement.

There have been a total of 142 team members answering the questionnaire which has a total of 38 questions divided in four topics: This article focuses on two of these topics: Evaluations and Working together.

There are eight questions about Evaluation. 90% of the respondents said they gather students' feedback. 78,2% said they analyse results of previous inspections and audits. 97% said they evaluate their lessons/instructions with their students. 83,8% said that as a team they analyse the outcomes of students' feedback/questionnaires and 84,5% said they review their program based on student feedback. 73,6% of the respondents said that evaluation of the class work by students is a topic in their team meeting and almost the same amount, 72%, said that work placement evaluation is a structural returning topic in their team. The evaluation of the year programme by students is a topic in the team for 63,4% of the respondents.

The final seven questions are about the way the teams work together. 16,2% of the respondents said they often visit a team member in their classroom, 55% do it sometimes whereas 28,6% never do it. 76,9% said that they discuss the way a team member implements the educational programme with him/her, giving feedback. 88,9% said that as a team they make clear rules about student behaviour in the class/school and all of the respondents said that they keep these rules. 88% said that as a team they try to have a general agreement about the evaluation of students' soft skills. 93,7% said that they often or sometimes communicate together about what they may expect from each other.

The final question is very important when working on the culture of quality improvement in the teams.

3.1.1 *Stories about a team facing the mirror*

As an example of how the intrinsic motivation to work on quality improvement functions, this is a story from one of the partners' pilot teams: All team members are looking towards the screen in confusion; it shows that all teachers follow the agreed rules regarding students' behaviour except for one person. The facilitator asks: how do you feel about this as a team? The team members start talking and one of the teachers says: "It was me. I said no because I don't agree with the rules." The team members decided to take the topic 'student rules' straight on the agenda of the next meeting, to discuss the fact that one members thinks that she can follow her own opinion instead of the team's decision.

Another team felt that they did not want to see themselves back in the quality portraits as the individual 'workers' that they are. This started the conversation about how they themselves could become a team instead of a group of individual teachers that belong to an administrative team.

3.1.2 *The four quality culture portraits of EQAVET, NL*

The team members were finally asked how they would subscribe the work on quality improvement in their team according to the 4 draft portraits of EQAVET, NL. They are: Behaviour oriented, System oriented, Awareness oriented and People oriented.

In the Transnational Research Report, the outcomes of the participating teams have been gathered together. However, when it comes to reflecting the outcomes in the team itself, only the specific outcomes of the team are of importance. The facilitator only shows the team members a mirror. It is their own individual outcomes together that tells the members something about their team culture.

So, the Quality culture in a team may be based on different orientation types:

System oriented quality – The presence of a quality system improves the mutual work on the educational quality.

Quality oriented behaviour – when acting with a focus towards quality, it is about the behaviour of teachers and others, focused on improving the quality of education.

Quality awareness – it is the striving towards quality on individual level based on own values and intentions. These values and intentions are decisive for the behaviour of the persons involved.

People oriented quality culture – In this culture, the mutual striving of a group towards quality is shown.

Within this system, behaviour, awareness or people oriented quality culture there are no choices that are good or wrong. You can only say that these are different choices. However, it is very important to strengthen the quality culture in teams to reach effective quality improvement. Trusting each other, for instance, means also that team members have fewer problems sharing responsibility.

What is important is the fact that all team members have the same picture in mind when talking about their common culture of quality improvement, that they can learn from each other how to act in specific circumstances, that they all know that everyone follows the rules and values as agreed together - or in the organisation.

Often team members are not aware of this common behaviour or culture, because teams are not communicating about a mutual vision on these topics. Not having a mutual vision on the quality culture can cause problems on other topics in team meetings.

The NLQAVET model of quality culture has also been used by the QUAL4T2 project to start discussions in the teams that filled in the questionnaire.

3.2 The importance of a mature team

Quality improvement is a method for continuously finding better ways to provide better service. At its core, quality improvement is a team process. Why? Under the right circumstances, teams harness the knowledge, skills, experience and perspectives of different individuals to make lasting improvements. The team's ability as a whole is more than the sum of the abilities of individual members. It multiplies the potential of individual members.

However, teamwork doesn't happen by accident. It requires effort and commitment, and a willingness to accept the challenges of different individuals working together. Inputs from all team members need to be solicited. Questions need to be asked and answered. Ideas need to be shared and agreed on - because for a team to be effective, the team members must share a common, collective goal and work together to achieve it. This goal aspect is very critical in the team because teamwork relies on individuals ... individuals performing to their best. Therefore, the organisation cannot ignore or negate the individual's needs. Actually, the leader's role should be to help each individual align his or her own needs and interests with the goals and pursuits of the team. A team that is filled with individuals who are committed to and passionate about the team's goals, because they coincide with their own needs, is far more powerful than a team filled with individuals who have over-ridden their own needs, for the good of the team, and are co-operating in an uninspired, uninterested manner. [4]

Based on the outcomes of the TCA in Zandvoort, The Netherlands - where 40 European quality specialists were together - there also seems to be a connection between a good team, team culture and an effective team year plan. 'Enthusiasm & contribution by all, team spirit, team work, motivated teachers and consensus among the team members', were named by the international participants. [3]

3.2.1 Toolkit theme A: Quality culture [5]

The following tools are developed within the QUAL4T2 project and currently piloted in organizations in five different countries (Denmark, Italy, Greek, Netherlands and Spain):

1. Questionnaire about awareness
2. Dream session
3. Lighthouse
4. The five elements
5. Feedback in teams
6. Self-assessment
7. Peer to peer feedback

Ad 1: Most vocational, educational and training providers are already involved in and committed to quality processes. With this questionnaire, teacher teams are consulted on their perception of their current year plan, their aims and ambitions, the evaluations they use, and the way they work together. This questionnaire should be used before the new year plan, as it helps teams to get an overview of the current situation of the team and thereby, it will also help the team detect improvement areas. The template provided is completely flexible and can be adapted to gather information about some topics that are specific to the team. The questionnaire which has a total of 38 questions is divided in four topics: 1. Team Year Plan, 2. Aims and Ambitions, 3. Evaluations and 4. Working Together. It is essential that the results of the questionnaire are shared and discussed together within the team to develop a shared understanding of the outcomes, the evaluation of them, and what to do next in order to improve the results. As with all the products in the toolkit, the questionnaire can be downloaded and edited to meet the specific needs of the team.

Ad 2: When institutions are considering their long-term strategy, this instrument can be an excellent way of preparing it. The outcomes of the dream session can be used as a valuable input for the future strategic planning in your institution. In the team, it can provide a sense of common long-term goal in which all members of the team can recognise him or herself.

Ad 3: This is a task which can be used if the team needs to work in the same direction on a long-term basis. Assignments are often given to the individual team members, and it may be difficult to keep the general view of the teamwork. At the same time, this task gives the team opportunities to open fruitful discussions about a common direction for the team to ensure that all team members can answer for the same goals. It is also an opportunity for a team to discuss whether the members together have the competences needed to perform the tasks given. This task can be used in both small teams as well as for an entire organisation to discuss the general visions.

Ad 4: This instrument will help create and support an annual cycle to keep focus on five key elements that form a good teaching teamwork.

Ad 5: This task can be connected with tools from theme A about quality culture improvement and tool no 6 about self-assessment. Every team member gives feedback in his/her daily work in the classroom/team. Most educational institutes have a standard for formal and structural assessment. However, this feedback is often spontaneous instead of structural. Therefore, every team member, teacher or manager should understand that not all feedback is effective.

Ad 6: Just as any skilled professional, a good teacher/trainer takes the time every so often to evaluate their competences. This checklist can be used as a starting point for your self-assessment and development. It can be adapted. We advise you to discuss your results with your coordinator/team leader who will also have completed the evaluation for you and to decide on the steps for improvement. It should lead to a personal development plan.

Ad 7: This tool can be used from the very early stages of a training/school year; and later it can become a regular appointment. It helps trainers/teachers to recognise and manage both their own and others' emotions and discover that group discussion, in a climate of mutual respect, is much more "comfortable". Everyone can glimpse possible and more appropriate behaviours/actions towards achieving educational objectives as well as personal and professional growth. The tool can also be used for other groups, such as learners, quality staff and/or management.

4 CONCLUSIONS

From the contacts with the teams that started piloting the first versions of the QUAL4T2 products, being the Quality Guide and Toolkit for teams, we can for now only carefully mention some temporary outcomes:

- Intrinsic motivation starts with seeing the outcomes of the individual team members combined in one team portrait. This provides input for a team conversation; members are usually surprised about some differences in the outcome. It should not be the moderator teaching the team what to do, but we find out that motivation starts when the team tells the team what to do.
- An individual feedback towards a team member is less effective than team feedback.
- The role of a coach should be to ensure that the team focuses on one or two aspects when working on their team culture.
- With the use of the questionnaire, topics like peer to peer review or giving/receiving feedback find a natural way to start a discussion in the team. This seems to work more effectively than a manager telling the team that they should start with peer to peer learning or feedback activities.
- The Quality portraits are a functional starting point for a team reflection. (Is this what we want to be?)



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