

Full Length Research Paper

Analytical observations of the applicability of the concept of student-as-customer in a university setting

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Total quality management (TQM) strives to improve organizational functioning by carefully studying the interface between an organization's mission, values, vision, policies and procedures, and the consumer that the organization serves. Central to this approach to revitalizing economic institutions is the importance placed on client satisfaction. The maxim "the customer is always right," or "the customer is the king" are the driving forces in TQM efforts to increase performance and profits. Customers' needs and desires are researched and analyzed, and product design, sales and service are modified to produce higher levels of customer satisfaction and, in turn, greater profitability for the company. Can the concept of "student-as-customer" readily fit into the context of education and learning in higher institutions as a jointly negotiated process? The main focus of this paper is to analyze the debate between the two opposing views: some concede that similarity exists between a university student and a more traditional customer at, say, a local department store, while others argue that this kind of comparison is without merit. A good number of university educations are indeed similar to business, and for these, the TQM emphasis on the customer rings true. In many ways, university students are customers. Universities should make every reasonable effort to satisfy students in such areas and to attempt to gather student input in assessing how well these needs are being met. However, applying the concept of student-as-customer in its fullest scope may run the risk of placing the teacher/instructor in the position of merely responding to what the students want, sacrificing any personal autonomy and professional responsibility. This could, if taken to its ultimate end, mean that the teacher would have very little part to play in decisions regarding the aims, content, methods and evaluation of the learning and educational processes. The major challenge for today's universities is to strike the balance between the "student-as-customer" and the "student-as-learner."

Key words: Total quality management, student-as-customer, learning, education, management rationality.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges presented by national goals for higher education, changing patterns of enrolment, demand for increased access to higher education, decline of funding levels per student, and the associated pressure to generate income from other sources accompanied by the emergence of market forces in higher education have all created a situation which encourages management rationality in conjunction with strategic planning. The role of management rationality in higher educational governance has increased - performance indicators are part of educational governance tied to a discourse of market form accompanied by expectations of particular types of performance (Coffield and Williamson, 1999).

This is reflected in the industrialization of the language

of universities where students have become customers and there is widespread reference to mission statements, and to teaching as curriculum delivery. The forces of management rationalism have positioned universities more squarely as players in an education market place and students have embraced the role of customer - "shopping around for courses that best suit their desires" (Boud, 1997). Garrick (1999) argued that the incorporation of work-pace based learning into most university education is in part a response to pressure exerted by the changing economic times and associated "free-market" philosophies, changed ideas about the concept of student-teacher relationship and philosophic approaches aimed at increasing the facilitation of lifelong learning.

THE TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT (TQM) PRINCIPLES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The total quality management (TQM), born in the 1930s among the management circles in the United States and nurtured in post World War II Japanese business and industrial communities, has spread rapidly through higher education in various parts of the world during the past decade. There is no single theoretical formalization of TQM, but the American quality gurus, Deming and Juran, and the Japanese writer, Ishikawa, provided a set of core assumptions and specific principles of management which can be synthesized into a coherent framework (McShane and Von Glinow, 2000). TQM is a business discipline and philosophy of management which institutionalizes planned and continuous business improvement. The real test of quality management is its ability to satisfy customers in the marketplace. TQM assumes that quality is the outcome of all activities that take place within an organization. Accordingly, all functions and all employees have to participate in the improvement process and to ensure this; organizations need both quality systems and culture (Razali et al., 2000; Rue and Byars, 2000).

For the purpose of this discussion, certain principles of total quality management may be described briefly based on the Deming (1986) landmark work. Firstly, top management is the main drive of TQM. Quality is a strategic issue for corporate management and is not just an operational issue for lower hierarchical levels. Quality includes innovation, which is the search for more effective ways of meeting customers' requirements, as well as improving the efficiency of existing operations. Top management determines quality priorities, establishes the systems of quality management and the procedures to be followed, provides resources and leads by example. Oversight of the improvement process normally resides in a committee steered by senior managers reporting directly to the top of the organization. Secondly, quality improvement occurs in two places. "Vertical structure", this has to do with where improvement activity takes place within naturally occurring organizational units, such as departments, sections, and work teams. However, since many issues cut across these units and the divisions with regards to functions, new arrangements for "horizontal" coordination of improvement are also required. Cross-functional management is an essential feature of TQM. One principle of horizontal activity is the idea of the internal customer where organizational units discuss the quality of their performance with those who receive their output in order to improve the service they provide to these "customers." The use of ad hoc, multifunctional or interdepartmental project teams is a second way of organizing across the vertical lines. An implication of this is that a matrix organizational design may provide a particularly appropriate structure within which such activity can take place (Trumbull, 1993).

Thirdly, the crucial role in business improvement lies with management. Major innovation is clearly a managerial task; also the incremental improvement of existing operations is primarily the responsibility of management. Most quality problems occur in systems controlled by managers and they have the power to resolve them, whereas rank and file employees are less to blame and usually lack the authority to put things right. Deming and Juran estimate that 10 percent or less of quality issues in manufacturing operations can be tackled by workers and foremen on their own (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2000). Ishikawa further suggests that, within the management group, middle managers have distinct place in improvement. They stand at the cross-roads of the vertical and horizontal planes, and are also responsible for the activities that take place among rank and file employees, notably quality control circles in the Japanese case (Robbins, 1998).

Fourthly, there are rigorous and systematic techniques of issue identification and problem solving which every employee should be trained to use. These include measures of non-conformance and, where appropriate, statistical methods of process quality control, measures of the cost quality, cause and effect analysis and decision making procedures. These in turn rely on accurate and relevant information on every aspect of the business. Hard data are a requirement of what has aptly been labeled as "management by fact" (LaBarre, 1999).

Finally, the improvement process both creates and depends on cultural change. The appropriate culture has many elements. It includes the internalization of quality and continuous improvement as a goal of all activities; the absolute priority of customer satisfaction; a systematic and rational approach to quality improvement issues; more open communications so that those further down are listened to by those further up; the greater involvement of a wider range of people in the decision making process; and the creation of high trust social relationships. Deming and Juran believe that organizations have to change their managerial styles and personnel policies in order to incorporate rank and file employees into this quality culture, recognizing that traditional practices have led to a cultural divide between managers and other employees; this makes their participation in improvement problematic (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2000).

THE STUDENT-AS-CUSTOMER VERSUS THE STUDENT-AS-LEARNER

Ellis (1993), although recognizing the complexity of the nature of the student-as-customer, argues that it is still central and vital in the process of education. After all, it is the students who directly experience education, they are the ones who are in the classroom and also utilize the resources within the educational establishment. It would appear that the conceptualization of student-as-customer

would fit well with much espoused beliefs that the students are the immediate beneficiaries of the educational process. Woodward (1993) argued that there are three reasons why it is appropriate to view the student as customer. Firstly, it is the students who invest their time and experience in the educational processes that the university offers. For many students, this is a once in a lifetime investment. Secondly, the students are the most direct recipient of the service. Thirdly, the students may select from alternative suppliers the services they wish to partake of. One main issue that came up frequently in considering whether a student is a customer was that students do not have the expertise in education. They do not know what courses they need to take or what the content of the courses should be. Therefore the assumption was that, since they do not know what they need, they cannot be customers. Clearly most students do not have expertise in their field of study. A student may want to be a physicist, but he or she probably has only a dim understanding of what is involved in becoming qualified to be a physicist. That is why the student turns to the university for help. Many organizations simply do not grasp that the job of serving customers is much more than simply fulfilling customers' demands. The fact is, most customers do not know what they need because they are not the experts. One of the roles of a supplier is to provide expertise to help customer solve his or her problem. Pneumatics tires, air conditioners and video compact disc (VCD) players were not developed because customers asked for them. People wanted a smoother tire, to be comfortable when it was 90 degrees outside the house, or to experience a better sound quality. Expertise can be a powerful competitive edge in satisfying customers. Ultimately, suppliers set the expectations of customers. Universities with in-depth, cutting edge expertise in a field have a real advantage in selling potential students on what they can expect to learn.

What must be realized by universities is that students do have some expertise and some legitimate wants when it comes to educational experience, and only if the focus is on the student as customer it is likely that these wants will be satisfied. For example, in the case of University Brunei Darussalam, more and more students have been in the workplace for sometime and are returning to university either to start their undergraduate degrees or to study for advanced degrees. To address their needs, the university must offer classes with flexible hours such as after office hours and weekends. In conducting classes, lecturers must be more sensitive to the fact that these students have already put in a full workday. Once one begins to see the student as customer, ones approach to the job changes.

Failure to realize that students are customers can lead to inappropriate attitudes and behavior on the part of the faculty members. For example, a lecturer may believe that because he is a full professor, he is entitled to show up in the lecture hall ten minutes late for a course that meets three times a week for fourteen weeks (in a semes-

ter). This amounts to seven hours of class time that the professor does not have to prepare for. It also means that the students are been cheated because they paid for a full course.

Some educational experts who used market analogy pointed out that the education market is going to drive the universities out of business unless they start to treat students more like customers (Morral, 1999). However, another group of experts challenged such perspective and argued that the market analogy is fine for non-academic functions, such as book purchases, food service, or parking facilities but not for academics (Wallace, 1999; McSweeny, 1992). They further argued that university is responsible for educating students to be critical thinkers and responsible citizens not producing happy customers.

These points are well taken. We would be ill-advised to turn universities into a degree mill in a misguided attempt to please our students by treating them as customers "who are always right". On the other hand, we must avoid basing our criticism on a misleading and stereotypical perception of the "customer-focused organization". By rejecting the customer analogy out of hand, we may be feeding another destructive stereotype; that is the inwardly focused, bureaucratic ivory tower that is unresponsive to the real needs of its students. Perhaps there are insights to be gained from the market analogy that can help serve better the university's educational mission.

Two major caveats need to be applied to the market analogy if it is to be useful as a model for university education. By properly positioning itself in the marketplace, an organization can both influence its customer base and educate the customers it attracts. There are markets that serve the short term and destructive impulses of immature or uneducated customers, and there are firms that gear themselves towards serving and cultivating more educated and discriminating tastes. Just like an airline would never let its customers dictate safety standard, a responsible university would not let students determine curriculum or grading policy. However, we need to treat our students with dignity. We need to recognize that they are individuals with different backgrounds and unique learning styles. We must challenge our students to take responsibility for their own learning. These objectives are compatible with a customer orientation, properly interpreted. Unfortunately, hostility to a customer orientation may project to our listeners an attitude that we have nothing to learn from our students about their learning needs.

Parallel to businesses, universities throughout the world have responded to mounting competitive pressures by looking at new ways of "doing business." Universities compete with one another to attract and retain students, attract sources of research money, and retain or regain the trust of general public and politicians who have begun to question the cost-benefit ratio of university education. University education has to embrace the customer satisfaction perspective of TQM in the hopes that it will bring

with it the revitalization and keys to survival.

Many if not all aspects of university education are indeed similar to business and, for these, the TQM emphasis on the customer rings true (Mears, 1993). In many ways, university students are customers. They are customers because they have engaged in an economic agreement, a contract for good and services and an opportunity to learn in an organization that is in the business of selling these opportunities. As a result, students should be given an opportunity to voice their needs, desires, and satisfaction with their learning environment and their voices should be heard. Students deserve efficient registration procedures, good food, safe living conditions, open communication and feedback channels, skilled lecturers, accessible computer labs, satisfactory recreational facilities, clear syllabi, and reliable exams and grading systems. Universities should make every reasonable effort to satisfy students in such areas and to attempt to gather their input in assessing how well these needs are met.

There may be a problem if the customer satisfaction concept is applied too broadly in the university setting. Students are learners as well as customers, and it is for this fundamental reason that the "customer is always right" slogan breaks down. *Ipsa facto*, students attend university to grow, expand their horizons, and become better prepared to succeed in tomorrow's world. If students are at the university to retain the status quo rather than to grow they are paying a very high price for it. Most of the time, money, and effort would be wasted if students leave the learning institutions with the same knowledge, attitudes, and skills they had when they arrived.

The growth process, which in the educational context emphasizes learning does not easily adapt itself to the TQM concept of the "customer is always right." Satisfying learners often runs counter to the conditions necessary for learning because learning often involves some discomfort, disequilibrium, and challenge. Students learn through the cognitive conflicts that occur when they face new points of view, new information, and new perspectives. Students learn when they are encouraged to reflect actively on the information that is unfamiliar and initially illogical or even threatening. In such situations, the dynamic tension created between the known and the new causes new thinking, analysis and reevaluation. This new thinking or learning can be seen as analogous to the struggle for life that a chick faces during the hatching period. Unless it struggles to free itself from the confines of its shell, from the boundaries of its known world, and to enter the unknown the chick will never grow into a chicken. In the same way, the struggle to understand new and sometimes incongruous information produces learning and helps students realize their full potential.

Learning also occurs when students are actively involved in the construction of new knowledge. A real learner is a producer, not a consumer of the knowledge he or she gains. As research has repeatedly shown,

active learners grow while passive learners barely remember the facts long enough to regurgitate them during test. The learner joins the lecturer and the other students in the class as part of the management and production staff of one's own learning process in constructing knowledge. As part of the management and production staff of their own learning process, students must take responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, learning is a direct result of the student's effort rather than a service that the student purchases.

If the TQM principle of the "customer is always right" does not apply to the student-as-learner, Do students still have the right to expect a good learning environment? The answer is YES. Students should expect their lecturers to create learning environments in which they are challenged by ideas just far enough beyond grasp that they must struggle to learn but not so far that they become frustrated and disillusioned. They should expect faculties to create learning environments in which learners actively participate in the learning process and take responsibility for their own learning. Students should realize that the university is not selling a commodity called learning but rather providing them with an environment in which to learn, to grow, and to change, thereby sharing faculties and other resources to assist each of them in that process.

Finally, learning also occurs outside the lecture halls; in the hostels, the local community, and other on-campus and off-campus locations. Just as in lecture halls, students in these non-academic environments learn by dealing with difficulty and difference. The struggle may take the form of a challenge to one's established notions about people, attitudes, values, and information through interpersonal interaction and conflict management. Roommate differences, for example, should be seen as learning situations and not just as problems needing administrative intervention. If authentic learning is viewed as growth through struggle, students' development or learning in the hostel or other out-of-class settings is similar to student learning within the lecture hall. In all contexts in which a student is a learner, growth occurs where there is a challenge of new ideas and the learner takes responsibility for the learning process.

The concept of TQM and the applicability of "student-as-customer" concept in a university setting are complicated by the issues of who defines purpose and who is the customer in education. Nevertheless, this concept is a powerful one and has much to offer to our higher learning institutions. The concept will necessitate an increasing sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of educationalists, university administrators and policy makers in the country, to the views of all those involved in the process. Every university must strive to satisfy its students with the mechanics or policies of instruction and the quality of campus life. But creating learning environment that do not challenge students and in which they get exactly what they want in ways to which they have been accustomed to, does not contribute to authen-

tic and meaningful learning experience.

CONCLUSION

What should be the answer to the question posed in the title of this paper? Is the concept of student-as-customer applicable in a university setting? The answer to the question depends on what kind of customer. It also depends on how well to balance the role of student-as-customer with the role of student-as-learner. Both objectives can be served well by positioning to deliver a high quality education, treating students with dignity and recognizing them as individuals with unique needs and abilities, and by expecting them to rise to the high expectations that are set. Unthinking hostility towards university in terms of market analogy risks perpetuating the stereotype of one-size-fits-all instruction delivered by an indifferent lecturer to a huge lecture room of bored students, and managed by a bureaucratic and uncaring administration. Properly applied, the market analogy can help universities find ways to deliver a higher quality education to students, graduate more highly qualified workers for employers, and develop more responsible citizens for society as a whole.

In summary, the TQM focus on customer satisfaction has much to offer in university education. However, those who apply these principles would do well to consider the distinction between the student- as- customer and student-as-learner. Every university must strive to satisfy its students with the mechanics and policies of instruction and the quality of campus life. But creating learning environments that do not challenge students and in which they get exactly what they want in ways to which they have been accustomed to do not contribute to authentic learning. The model should be used when it is appropriate and seek other counsel when it is not. University education must make this distinction if it is to realize its mission of preparing students for tomorrow.

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