

The “value” of evaluating teaching practices for continuous improvement

Lydia Richards:
University of South Australia, SA

Abstract

The introduction of AQTF 2007 (and successive frameworks) in VET encourages an outcomes focused audit approach. This approach is aimed at allowing Registered Training Organisations greater flexibility with the objective of encouraging innovation, and ultimately, continuous improvement. However, defining, let alone achieving continuous improvement, is challenging. This presentation highlights some findings from qualitative research, undertaken as part of a Masters of Education, which investigated VET practitioners’ understanding of continuous improvement in their teaching practices and AQTF 2007 compliance.

This presentation describes how practitioners perceive the audit requirement for demonstrated continuous improvement as more focused upon demonstrating minor incremental change and keeping up-to-date, and how this focus, coupled with the lack of time for practitioners to reflect on their work, may restrict opportunities for more innovative change. In addition, the need for systematic evaluation of data to inform change was not fully appreciated as a fundamental characteristic of continuous improvement by all practitioners.

This discussion highlights the need for practitioners to develop an enhanced understanding of continuous improvement and the importance of evaluation of data, as well giving them the time and skills to undertake evaluation and reflect upon their work. The role of auditors in exercising their professional judgement to encourage and promote the gathering and review of evidence for genuine continuous improvement rather than minor adjustments is also emphasised.

Introduction

The objective of AQTF 2007 (and successive registration standards) has been to increase the emphasis on quality, with the stated objective that Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) demonstrate continuous improvement in Vocational Education and Training (VET). This new flexible approach (focused on outcomes rather than process), coupled with increased emphasis on continuous improvement, is aimed at better enabling RTOs to improve and innovate. Past registration standards have been criticised for excessive prescription, consequently creating a myopic focus on procedures and processes, to the detriment of good performance and quality outcomes in VET (KPA Consulting 2004).

In the Australian VET sector past investigations seeking evidence of quality reveal the struggle RTOs have had in successfully adopting a quality approach (e.g. Hager 1997, Gibb 2003, MacRae 2004). Other studies reveal that the approach to quality and

innovation in RTO's is often ad hoc (Mitchell et al. 2003; Callan 2004; Mitchell et al. 2006). Others have highlighted issues and concerns surrounding RTO capability (e.g. Clayton & Fisher 2005; Callan et al. 2007; Harris, Clayton & Chappell 2008).

In other industry sectors it is suggested that there are considerable difficulties in successfully implementing continuous improvement (Chapman et al. 2000). Failure rates are high (Bessant & Caffyn 1997). Major impediments within organisations seeking to successfully implement continuous improvement have been identified as: failing to understand the concept, lack of organisational skills for implementation, and, lack of will to progress continuous improvement (Bessant & Caffyn 1997).

Understanding the concept of continuous improvement is imperative to the successful adoption and sustainability of this approach. In 2008 a report on the effectiveness of AQTF 2007 (which had only been recently introduced at that time) noted:

...many RTOs expressed a lack of understanding as to what was meant by 'continuous improvement', and uncertainty as to how to implement an effective continuous improvement approach within their organisation. They also expressed concerns as to how to competently demonstrate continuous improvement approaches in practice within their organisations (KPMG 2008, p.57)

An investigation to explore individual practitioner understandings of continuous improvement is the first step in determining if the objectives of AQTF 2007, namely increasing flexibility and support for innovation, will be achieved. The study explored what individual practitioners and managers (within selected RTOs) understand of the concept of continuous improvement and what they understand will be required to demonstrate continuous improvement as required by AQTF 2007.

Study Method

The study was limited to two of the three (as they were then) TAFE SA institutes. Participants were purposively selected, having been identified as being likely early adopters of continuous improvement by a source within TAFE SA. Although the interviewees were limited to ten practitioners, they were sampled from two diverse teaching groups with the aim of providing insight into approaches from different groups as well as different levels within those groups. Consequently educational managers and quality managers were included as well as longer serving practitioner lecturers and those more recently employed. In addition, Quality Assurance Group (QAG) convenors who are also practitioners were drawn from different teams, thus providing a broader perspective. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted in mid 2009.

Understanding the concept of continuous improvement a review of the literature

Bessant and Caffyn (1997) define continuous improvement using terminology such as *organisation-wide, focused, sustained* and *incremental*. Boer et al. (2000) use similar terminology which includes terms such as *planned, organised, ongoing* and *company-wide*. These definitions emphasise that continuous improvement is a systematic and ongoing process (rather than an ad hoc one), with the objective of improving overall performance through change. A planned and systematic approach to continuous improvement suggests the need for practitioners to learn from reflecting upon past activities and this necessarily involves evaluation of data (Rijnders & Boer 2004).

Although continuously improving, as the terminology suggests, appears straightforward, this underestimates the complexity of implementing continuous improvement as a management technique for improvement. Continuous improvement appears to be both the complex process of implementation that is, a management technique embedded in quality principles, as well as the ultimate outcome, change.

Reflective learning

Sitkin et al. (1995) consider organisational performance can be maximised by providing employees with the freedom to explore and innovate for more radical change. The enhanced nature of this learning has also been described as “double loop” learning (Argyris 1997). “Double loop” learning is evidenced by employees having the capability of enhanced review and reflection to enable them to reconsider accepted practice and challenge current methods (Ayas & Zenuik 2001). The approach of encouraging more reflective practice towards innovation has been the focus of academic attention in the field of continuous improvement over recent years (Hyland, Soosay & Sloan 2003; Anderson & Boer 2007). Indeed, the emphasis upon greater employee reflection and consequent innovation has created a focus on what is now termed “continuous innovation” (e.g. Boer et al. 2001; Boer & Gertsen 2003; Smeds & Boer 2004). The concept of continuous innovation suggests that, ideally, an organisation should aim to be ambidextrous, that is, combining a mix of both routine and control for systematic single loop learning, but also enabling the more innovative reflective learning to occur by providing practitioners with the time, motivation and capability to combine both exploitative and explorative activity (Hyland & Boer 2006; Richtner & Ahlstrom 2007).

Planned and focused data collection, evaluation and learning

Change resulting from continuous improvement has traditionally been characterised by incremental, as distinct from discontinuous dramatic, change (Imai 1986). Consequently changes arising from an ad hoc process, rather than the planned and systematic evaluation of data, may not be genuine demonstrations of continuous improvement. The iterative process of the plan-do-check-act cycle (Deming 1986; Imai 1986) demonstrates the dynamic nature of continually evaluating and reviewing to “close the loop” in the cycle by returning knowledge of what has been learnt back into the planning phase. A strategic focus on continuous improvement relies on clear management direction and constant evaluation (Kaye & Dyason 1999).

In the Australian VET sector studies suggest that data is not always evaluated to inform decisions on changes to teaching practice (Gibb 2003; MacRae 2004). Similar concerns about evaluation are raised in the UK (Visscher & Hendricks 2009) and in the European sector (Visscher 2009), highlighting a need not just for understanding evaluation but recognising also the time and motivation needed to undertake it. The implementation of AQTF 2007 clearly seeks to improve the focus on evaluation. The AQTF 2007 Users’ Guide now highlights the usage of data evaluation by requiring:

...a planned and ongoing process to systematically review and improve policies, procedures, products and services through analysis of relevant information and collection of data from clients and other interested parties, including staff. Data from the quality indicators provides a key tool for continuous improvement (DEST 2007, p. 4)

Process or Outcome?

Studies have suggested that early regulatory standards actually reduced RTO performance by encouraging minimum levels of compliance, rather than a comprehensive approach towards quality (e.g. Gibb 2003; KPA Consulting 2004; Grace 2005). Sallis (2002) describes two approaches to quality in education. The “procedural quality” (p. 13), is based on quality assurance, focusing on *proving* quality through performance measures. Embedded in this are systems, accountability and auditing. The other concept of quality he describes as “transformational quality”, (p. 14) which is more qualitative in nature, and, in his view, more about continuous improvement, organisational transformation and caring for the customer, than systems and hard data. Choi (1995) warns that a culture conducive to change needs to be process-orientated rather than results-orientated. Bessant et al. (2001) confirm that it is misleading to emphasise a focus on outcomes and maintain that continuous improvement should not be understood as a short-term activity; rather, it is an evolution and aggregation of key behavioural routines that develop over time, Figure One outlines some of these early behaviours they identified.

Understanding CI

- people at all levels demonstrate a shared belief in the value of small steps and that everyone can contribute, by themselves being actively involved in making and recognising incremental improvements.
- when something goes wrong the natural reaction of people at all levels is to look for reasons why etc. rather than to blame individual(s).
- people make use of some formal problem-finding and solving cycle.

Getting the CI habit

- people use appropriate tools and techniques to support CI
- people use measurement to shape the improvement process.
- people (as individuals and/or groups) initiate and carry through CI activities - they participate in the process.
- closing the loop - ideas are responded to in a clearly defined and timely fashion – either implemented or otherwise dealt with.

Focusing CI

- individuals and groups use the organisation’s strategic goals and objectives to focus and prioritise improvements everyone understands (i.e. is able to explain) what the company’s or department’s strategy, goals and objectives are.
- individuals and groups (e.g. departments, CI teams) assess their proposed changes (before embarking on initial investigation and before implementing a solution) against departmental or company objectives to ensure they are consistent with them.
- individuals and groups monitor/measure the results of their improvement activity and the impact it has on strategic or departmental objectives.
- CI activities are an integral part of the individual’s or group’s work, not a parallel activity.

Leading the Way

- managers support the CI process through allocation of time, money, space and other resources.
 - managers recognise in formal (but not necessarily financial) ways the contribution of employees to CI.
- managers lead by example, becoming actively involved in design and implementation of CI
- managers support experiment by not punishing mistakes but by encouraging learning from them...

Figure One Extract of early routines associated with CI and constituent behaviours (Bessant et al. 2001, pp. 72-73)

Findings and Discussion

All interviewees well understood the sustained and ongoing nature of continuous improvement, with statements from lecturers such as, *“It’s an expectation on the lecturer to be continually improving and be better than you were yesterday”* and, from another, *“...doing things better... in small step increments, looking at our processes and improving them”*. Most often the comments from practitioners and educational managers suggested an understanding of continuous improvement, in terms of registration compliance, as encompassing incremental minor changes, focusing on the necessity of keeping up-to-date and making minor changes to delivery of a non-break-through nature. These understandings, like the traditional kaizen approach of constant micro-management for change or single loop learning, dominated practitioner and educational manager interpretations of continuous improvement for AQTF 2007 compliance.

Bessant and Caffyn (1997 p.7) describe one form of understanding continuous improvement as a “preoccupation” with incremental change, which they contrast with a broader and potentially more advantageous understanding of continuous improvement which embraces broader change and innovation. The quality managers understood continuous improvement more in terms of the latter concept, although they recognised that it was not fostered, and was hampered, by lack of time for practitioners to reflect and funding limitations.

AQTF 2007 is explicit in requiring data collection and review for demonstrated continuous improvement. There was recognition from a quality manager that AQTF 2007 had brought an increased emphasis on evaluation, *“...there is a reasonable cohort out there that does surveys because they know they need to do surveys, but they don’t do surveys or feedback processes to get the benefit of the outcome from that and to use that... using stakeholder data to drive continuous improvement...AQTF just brought that upfront”*. An educational manager also noted the new focus on evaluation but acknowledged that *“even now, if people ignored it [evaluation] they could”*. At the time of interview the process of evaluation for some lecturers still appeared voluntary, *“I guess there’s just feedback from your surveys [and] then it’s up to you whether you do anything about it”*. Despite this increased emphasis on the need for systematic review and informed change through “closing the loop”, the process was still recognised, even by a quality manager, as needing greater attention, *“...closing the loop is a really important point. It’s not one that I feel we have done particularly well, so far”*.

Much of the activity described by practitioners that has led to change, which they considered continuous improvement, did not appear to be as a result of a systematic or planned approach to evaluation. Although many practitioners described individuals who they perceived as being “proactive” in their approach to continuous improvement, this “proactivity” was not necessarily based on a systematic review of data. One lecturer clearly advocated a systematic approach, *“...it needs to be a systematic approach to improving and that means it’s communicated as well, it’s a system, not just people doing their own thing, it’s shared across the work team”*. Whereas other practitioners indicated that they undertook only informal, ad hoc reviews as they considered necessary, such as recognising student concerns during

training delivery and seeking feedback when new delivery techniques were being used. There appeared no process to ensure systematic review and evaluation of data.

Practitioner and educational manager perceptions on the poor quality, and hence utility of the data collected, appeared to be a barrier to undertaking systematic evaluations to inform change. Responses from practitioners and educational managers align with findings of other studies in both VET and generally about the actual usage of data to actually inform change (e.g. Cousins & Leithwood 1986; Shulah & Cousins 1997; Kaye & Dyason 1999; Cracknell 2001; Gibb 2003; Visscher & Hendricks 2009). The perception of practitioners and educational managers was that there existed amongst many survey respondents an apathy and ignorance which negatively impacted upon both the quality and quantity of survey responses. Concerns were raised about stakeholder willingness to complete surveys particularly if the surveys were lengthy or confronted with too many survey instruments “...*they [stakeholders] always see there’s a heap of questions and if it is three pages long they have a heart attack*”, and, “*Oh, we’ve [the stakeholders] done this 50 question one, we’re not going to do any others...*”. In other cases, it appeared that the poor utility of answers was based on a perception of poor questioning. Although it was confirmed that some practitioners were consulted about the types of questions asked in surveys, the perception amongst many remained that the wrong questions were asked, or the type of responses given were irrelevant to improving teaching and assessment, “*I guess we find that we do a lot of surveys...some of them aren’t relevant to us but we still have to do them, blanket type one size fits all*”.

The number of surveys administered “by management” also seemed to add confusion over survey objectives. There was a strong perception amongst practitioners especially that much of the data was collected by management for management, and in their view considerable data were collected but not used for evaluation, “...*they [the data] are just collected and filed*”. Many practitioners referred to survey data being used to report to educational managers for quality *assurance* purposes, that is, to rectify major problems, such as a poor performance, rather than to identify opportunities for broader improvement. There was a general sense that a lot of data is collected, but practitioners were not always clear of the objectives for the collection. By way of contrast to the views of practitioners and educational managers, the quality managers believed that considerable efforts were now being applied to get valuable responses from stakeholders and more robust data “*gone are the days when we ask about the canteen*”. The quality managers emphasised that in their view careful question formulation, different methods of collecting data (such as focus groups), and efforts to teach survey respondents the value of providing feedback, were improving the value of data. However, at the time of interview, the descriptions of practitioners and educational managers suggest a lack of involvement from them in planning for data collection. Some had a lack of understanding of the necessity for evaluation and this lack of understanding, control and ownership may ultimately mean limited utilisation of data.

Practitioners or educational managers did not consider the necessity of reviewing data as a pre-requisite for AQTF 2007 compliance. Indeed there appeared a dual understanding of the concept of ongoing changes for improvement that the practitioners were seeking to embrace, as dedicated teaching professionals, compared to what would be sufficient for AQTF 2007 compliance. Practitioners suggested the

AQTF 2007 compliance was focused upon “...making sure our paperwork and everything is in place”. Another criticised what they perceived as the continual focus on process, “ I’ve got version control so I’ve continuously improved, that does not mean so much to me as developing something new... we should be testing exit profiles“ . The duality was recognised by one educational manager who stated, “it is an interesting concept because what is continuous improvement and what is meeting the audit requirements?”.

Despite a quality manager’s appreciation of the move away from process compliance “we’re really trying to get away from this idea of changing paragraph 2 on page 5 of that 35 page resource. We don’t necessarily want the detail of that, all we want to know is that you are improving”, there was still views from practitioners such as, “...we develop lots of paperwork just for auditors...just to explain why we do something... auditors without an educational background” . These perceptions may be a result of inertia from past audit practices which focused on processes or, perhaps, a continued focus on outcomes and demonstrating change at audit.

The terminology of AQTF 2007 emphasises a new focus on outcomes (change), “rather than the inputs used to get there” (DEST 2007, p. 1). The term “continuous improvement” invites expectations of continual change, yet fails to recognise that change may not always be required; rather, it is the evaluation and learning that is valuable to the process to determine if, and what, improvement and therefore change is necessary. The seeking of documented evidence of change at audit, such as improvement logs, may encourage superficial change, not necessarily informed by systematic evaluation. The focus on outcomes, rather than on the process, may also be contributing to this understanding. If at audit the focus remains on evidence of change, rather than evidence of the process of informed decision making (evaluation), the perception amongst practitioners may be perpetuated that any change is the objective, rather than the quality of the change. This was understood by a quality manager who stated “you start with the outcome and work backwards”, however the perception was not yet well understood by all practitioners and educational managers. If the focus of auditors and the terminology in AQTF 2007 were instead upon ensuring practitioners “continuously evaluated” rather than continuously improved (changed), this may support more quality changes.

The collection and systematic evaluation of suitable data to inform change is dependent upon developing in practitioners an understanding of the need for as well as the capability and capacity to undertake review and evaluation for continuous improvement. Many practitioners and educational managers referred to professional development in terms of assisting them to continuously improve, yet it was more in terms of providing immediate skills. Ideally training should include developing more enhanced capabilities, such as reflective evaluation for second loop learning and other skills identified as being utilised in organisations practicing continuous improvement such as problem identification, problem-solving tools and collaboration skills. Once practitioner capability has been developed suitable support and leadership will be also be required to enable these skills to be effectively used.

Conclusion

For the objectives of AQTF 2007 (and successive standards) to be achieved, RTOs will need to focus on ensuring practitioners “get the CI habit”. Developing an appreciation of, and the capability to undertake a systematic approach to evaluation, with a greater focus on seeking out appropriate data and greater opportunities for more reflective learning will provide more opportunity for genuine improvement. RTOs will need to consider practitioner development more strategically, including developing and supporting behavioural routines which support continuous improvement. Moreover, auditors too must exercise their professional judgement to encourage and support genuine improvement, rather than superficial change. Rather than focusing on change at audit, a focus on the process of evaluation and the presence of routine behavioural measures undertaken for continuous improvement, as well as the organisational support for these measures, may have a greater potential for encouraging genuine improvement in the teaching practices of RTOs.

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