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ARTICLE

From evaluation towards an agenda for quality improvement

The development and application of the Template Process

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ABSTRACT For many students and lecturers evaluation is confined to some form of survey. Whilst these can provide useful feedback, their focus is likely to reflect the values and norms of those commissioning and undertaking the evaluation. For real improvements in quality to occur both lecturers' and students' perspectives of factors that are important need to be made explicit and understood. Drawing upon literature relating to service quality and in particular the Service Template, this article outlines and evaluates an alternative approach for establishing students' and lecturers' perspectives, obtaining feedback and developing an agenda for improvement. Using the example of dissertation supervision, it is argued that a revised Template Process operating within a process consultation framework can meet these concerns. The article concludes with a discussion of the applicability of the Template Process to evaluating teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: *evaluation, process consultation, quality, students and lecturers, Template Process*

Introduction

Student involvement in evaluation of modules is well recognized as a cornerstone of quality improvement in higher education (Hendry et al., 2001). However, despite the attention devoted to evaluation and review, for many students and lecturers the process of feedback is confined to some form of survey designed to assess a range of pre-determined constructs and

administered at the end of a module. Whilst such surveys can provide useful feedback to lecturers, this raises a number of issues. These relate to the focus of data collection, and in particular the extent to which questions asked reflect the norms and values of both students and lecturers (Harvey, 1998), the low response rate to such surveys and the commitment of lecturers to use the findings to improve quality and the learning experience for students (Bingham and Ottewill, 2001).

Research exploring the quality review process has included work drawing upon the service quality literature, arguing that provision of higher education programmes can be equated to the provision of a service (Cuthbert, 1996). Whilst acknowledging that equating students to customers is open to debate, it can be argued that, by engaging in higher education, students are participating in and paying for a service. Consequently, evaluation and review of quality should reflect the dyadic nature of such service-type relationships (Rosen and Suprenant, 1998) incorporating the views of both students as users and lecturers as deliverers. It therefore follows that, if meaningful improvements are to occur, both students' and lecturers' perspectives on those factors that are important and their views on the quality of each need to be made explicit. These potentially differing perspectives need to be understood by lecturers if they are to go beyond addressing surface concerns relating to quality of learning.

In this article, we draw upon developments in service quality to propose an alternative approach to evaluation of the student experience. Following an overview of traditional measures of service quality and their shortcomings in relation to evaluation and review, Staughton and Williams' (1994) Service Template is evaluated as an alternative. Drawing upon this, developments to the process are described, which allow the views of students and lecturers to be captured separately and enable them to be explored and understood, prior to developing an agenda for action. The application of this process is illustrated, using a case study of the supervision of undergraduate dissertations at a new university business school. We conclude with a discussion of merits and shortcomings of the process.

Measuring quality

Within service quality literature, the most widely used and debated tool is SERVQUAL, a generic instrument developed to measure service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1991). This instrument and its derivatives have focused on measurement of the gap between service users' perceptions and expectations across a series of constructs that characterize a service. Notwithstanding shortcomings of conceptualizing service quality in this manner, recognized in the SERVQUAL debates (for example Carmen, 1990; Cronin

and Taylor, 1992), the use of a disconfirmation approach to highlight 'gaps' between perceptions and expectations and indicate possible areas for improvement is reported widely in the literature (for example: Parasuraman, 1995; Cuthbert, 1996; Narasimhan, 1997). Constructs where service users' perceptions do not meet expectations suggest areas for improvement. Constructs where users' perceptions equal or exceed expectations imply that there is no requirement for improvement, or that more may be being done than necessary. However, implicit within this is an assumption that data collected against generic dimensions can capture what is important about a particular service.

Research by Carmen (1990) highlights that the constructs used to characterize service quality are likely to be specific to a service and the industry within which it is located, a view echoed in respect of higher education (for example Cuthbert, 1996; Narasimhan, 1997). They and others argue that the use of generic constructs to measure service quality does not provide the details necessary to assess the quality of higher education relationships. Such relationships are considered more complex than those of other services such as a shop or restaurant. For example, they are more intense, last longer and contain considerable variety at both course and module levels. In addition, generic constructs may fail to capture the uniqueness of specific modules and be understood and interpreted differently by students and lecturers.

Traditional approaches such as questionnaires can, with careful design, minimize shortcomings associated with generic constructs and be used to explore gaps between perceptions and expectations. However, these often reflect the values, assumptions and issues that are important to their designers, which may not correspond to those of the students (Chapple and Murphy, 1996). Alternatively, standardized questionnaires make assumptions about the appropriateness of generic constructs across a range of different teaching and learning experiences (Narasimhan, 1997). Furthermore, the data collected may not provide clear indications of the action necessary to improve quality (Hendry et al., 2001).

The approaches outlined so far typically assess quality from only the students' perspective, failing to acknowledge the value of the lecturer's perspective in a dyadic service-type relationship. The logic underpinning the 'gaps' model (Parasuraman et al., 1985) provides further support for such an approach, as there may well be differences in that which is considered important by students and lecturers and their perceptions and expectations. Problems of second order interpretation can occur when data collected are subject to interpretation by a third party as part of review process, raising doubts about the validity and completeness of such data. A lecturer undertaking a module evaluation may have filtered and added her

or his own understanding to the language used and emphases placed by students.

Constructs used to evaluate quality in higher education therefore need to capture the realities separately for students and lecturers. If these constructs are to be of real benefit, they must be understood and interpreted by those responsible for improving quality in relation to the norms and values of those who generated them. Therefore, a process leading to an informed evaluation of quality should enable students and lecturers to make explicit, independently, their own ideas of those characteristics of teaching and learning that are important. Furthermore, students and lecturers need to be able to highlight, define and record independently any gaps between their perceptions and expectations. Finally, those responsible for improving quality have to be able to gain a critical understanding of both students' and lecturers' perceptions and expectations of the important constructs and any gaps between them.

The Template Process

Staughton and Williams' (1994) Service Template offers one approach to address such concerns. This was developed to illustrate the 'fit' between the service provided and that service's users' needs. The approach acknowledged the uniqueness of each specific service, allowing those constructs (characteristics) that users believed were important to be defined and gaps between perceptions and expectations to be highlighted and recorded visually. Each characteristic was defined by service users in terminology specific to the service. As part of this, users specified positive and negative descriptors for the extremes of a continuum for each characteristic. For example, the characteristic 'staff appearance' has been defined through the extremes of 'smart' and 'scruffy'. Subsequently, these users' perceptions and expectations for each characteristic were located upon its continuum, gaps between perceptions and expectations highlighting where action might be needed. However, by focusing on users, deliverers' perceptions and expectations were excluded, thereby not reflecting the dyadic nature of such relationships.

Subsequent development of the Service Template Process (Williams et al., 1999) partially addressed this shortcoming. Users and deliverers were selected using purposive samples based upon cases that were critical to the service, their quality perceptions and expectations being captured separately. Each resulting Service Template therefore reflected the language, terminology and priorities specific to either service users or deliverers. However, there was still a need to develop the process to enable those charged with improving quality to take ownership of the evaluation findings.

Organizational development research, and in particular that by Schein (1999), highlights the importance of problem ownership for those developing meaningful solutions. Schein also emphasizes the significance of process, often managed by a facilitator, to enable insights by all those involved. Thus, using a development of the Service Template Process within a process consultation framework might allow users and deliverers to work together to improve quality by jointly developing an agenda for action. Through a series of process consultations with seven UK based organizations, drawn from public and private sectors, the process was revised and extended to enable this (Saunders and Williams, 2001). The resultant Template Process is structured around three phases:

Phase I: Sample selection

Purposive samples are drawn from both students (users) and lecturers (deliverers), focusing upon obtaining critical cases from which logical generalizations may be made regarding the key themes. Thus, whilst the samples are not statistically representative, they capture the diversity and key dimensions of the service.

Phase II: Template generation and validation

Separate meetings, approximately two hours long, are held by a facilitator for between six and ten students and lecturers. Each meeting follows a process derived from the four stages of the Service Template Process (Williams et al., 1999):

Stage 1: Preparation The purpose and nature of the process is explained and meanings of terms clarified. The situation to be considered, for example dissertation supervision, is displayed prominently and referred to regularly to help maintain focus.

Stage 2: Explore service characteristics The characteristics of this situation are elicited and recorded in the order they emerge using the participants' words through a brainstorming type process. Clarification of meanings is sought; thereby helping ensure everyone in a meeting is using a similar frame of reference and has the same understanding. Subsequently, the list of characteristics is refined and descriptors generated for the extremes of each. For these, participants are asked to suggest the 'ideal' situation and the 'worst' case, the resulting bi-polar rating scales defining these extremes.

Stage 3: Plot perceptions and expectations against identified characteristics A visual representation (template) is built by recording first the expectations and then the perceptions for each characteristic

relative to the extremes on a 10-point scale (see Figures 1 and 2). For each characteristic, perceptions are defined through answers to the question 'What do you perceive to be the position today?' and expectations through 'What could reasonably be expected?' The resultant Template contains typically between 20 and 30 characteristics.

Stage 4: Interpret and validate issues Each completed template is discussed with those generating it. This helps confirm the internal validity of the template and those characteristics important in determining quality have been captured. Finally, participants are asked to score those characteristics they consider most important by allocating 100 points between them.

Phase III: Exploration, learning and possible action

Phase III draws upon Schein's (1999) ideas about process consultation. The templates are used as catalysts for the students and lecturers involved to gain insights into each other's perceptions and expectations, at a facilitated meeting. For this to be successful, there must be sufficient time for meaningful discussion and reflection. Facilitation needs to enable open, non-judgemental discussion between participants as they understand each other's templates and generate possible agendas for action. The event has three stages:

Stage 1: Brief participants, surface concerns and re-familiarize Participants are reminded of the process to date. The purpose of this two-hour meeting, to share explore, learn and identify possible actions, is restated.

Stage 2: Explore and learn This takes the form of dialogue between students and lecturers using their templates as catalysts. It focuses upon jointly establishing and understanding which characteristics are important for quality and why. The joint nature of the process helps reduce problems of second order interpretation, as participants who generated the templates undertake the exploration.

Stage 3: Generate possible agendas for action Participants are asked to reflect on the meeting and focus upon actions needed to improve quality. Through this an agenda of items requiring action is identified and owned by the students and lecturers.

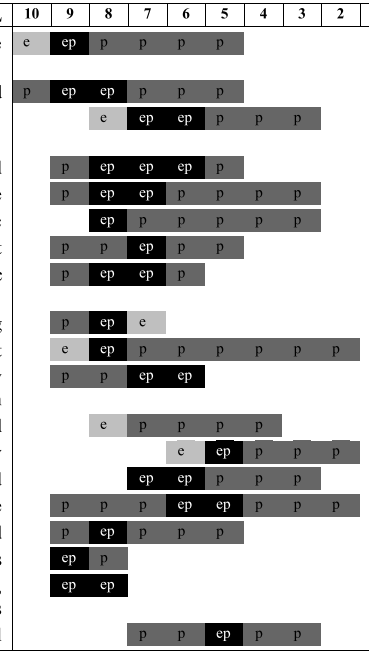
The application and utility of the Template Process to the evaluation and review of modules is illustrated now using an evaluation of dissertation supervision in a new university business school. Within this university, students' evaluations are a recognised component of quality assurance,

CHARACTERISTIC	SCORE	IDEAL	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	WORST
Advice	25	consistent – level playing field		p	p	ep	p	p	p	p	p	p	varied/inconsistent
Feedback	11	individualized/pre-arranged		p	ep	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	minimal – ARGH!
Relationship – trust	11	thorough approach		p	p	p	p	ep	p	p	p		ad hoc/skim reading
Relationship – support	7	reassuring, proactive		p	p	ep	p	p	p	p	p		hostile/vagueness/obstructive
Information – quality	7	know what talking about/appropriate	e		p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	vague/inappropriate/confusing
Availability of tutor	6	known and agreed	ep	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	ad hoc
Application of rules	6	thorough/clear	e	p	p	p	p						vague/no knowledge of rules
Workshop's time	5	reflects dissertation progress/ongoing	e								p	p	lumped together (as present)
Supervisor's enthusiasm for topic	4	motivating	p	p	p	ep	ep	ep	p	p	p		demoralizing
Supervisor's interest in topic/subject	4	empathy for individual students' dissertation	p	p	p	ep	ep	ep	p	p	p	p	routine 'just another piece of work'
Subject specialism	3	access	ep	p	p	p	p	p	p				access denied
Advice	3	constructive	e	ep	ep	ep	ep	ep	p	p			'closed door'
Information – quantity	3	consistency	e		p	p	p	p	p	p	p		extremes
Information – access	3	comprehensive/unlimited		e	e	p	p	p	p	p	p	p	restricted – Learning Centre
Time	1	sufficient, 'quality' time		p	ep	ep	ep	p	p	p	p	p	basic, minimum requirement
Time management	1	reflect individual student need		ep	ep	ep	p	p	p	p	p		get on with it/no involvement of supervisor
Assessment deadlines		coordinated	p	ep	ep	ep	ep	ep	p				congested/completely uncoordinated
Feedback		constructive			p	ep	p	p	p	p	p	p	random/meaningless
Relationship – support		coffee factor		p	p	p	ep	ep	p	p	p	p	no coffee
Support from other students		enabling group meetings			e	e	e			p	p	p	none
Student motivation		responsible for own learning/proactive		p	p	ep	ep						laziness/spoon fed

Key: expectations e | **overlap** | p **perceptions**

Figure 1 **Template reflecting students' perceptions and expectations of 'the dissertation supervisory process'**

CHARACTERISTIC	SCORE	IDEAL	WORST
Assessment criteria clarity	15	fit for purpose	ambiguous, difficult to use unhelpful
Student's commitment to topic	15	enthusiastic, interested, involved	beer and football
Student's attitude/preparedness	13	taking ownership, maturity, pro-active	'start in May', aimless, absent student, inactive
Student's time management	10	structured	back-burner, neglected, negligent
Physical environment	7	quiet, one-to-one	noisy, chaotic
Student's expectations	5	realistic	off the planet, unachievable
Student's perception of supervisor's role	5	resource, consultant	gopher, ghost writer
Supervisor – topic selection	5	expert, enthusiastic	nobody else available, 'have you got a minute', last duck
Working together (process)	5	agreed contracts, mutual understanding	hostage, cross-purposes
Assessment criteria – objective measurement	5	valid reliable assessment	subjective, volatile
Student's relationship	4	symbiotic, positive, responsive, happy to be in the same room	dependent, dead sponge, from a different planet
Supervisor's knowledge of students	4	informed	misconceived
Supervisor support	4	community	isolated
Student's research skills	3	competent, developed	non-existent
Supervisor support		readily available	you're on your own
Supervisor support		need is clearly identified	unaware of need for support
Time of day		appropriate to needs	slotted in
Timing of appointments		self management/time managed, reflects student needs	ad hoc, crisis
Student's quality		intellectual	slow, dull, thick



Key: expectations e **overlap** ep **p** **perceptions**

Figure 2 **Template reflecting supervisors' perceptions and expectations of 'the dissertation supervisory process'**

questionnaires being used systematically to collect feedback for review purposes.

Using the Template Process

The dissertation module operating within this business school has, since the mid-1990s, doubled in size to over 300 students along with a corresponding growth in supervisor numbers. Each student attends six research methods workshops, delivered at the start of level III and is allocated a supervisor, who provides one-to-one support. A growing number of comments from students regarding the nature and quality of supervision received suggested there were associated issues that had not been identified in the end-of-module evaluation questionnaire. This, combined with the rapid growth led the module tutor to undertake a full review of the dissertation module and its operation. In discussion with the module tutor, it was agreed that we would act as facilitators using the Template Process to review dissertation supervision. Through this, we aimed to capture students' and supervisors' expectations and perceptions of the dissertation supervision process and their suggestions for possible actions.

Two purposive samples were selected to represent student and supervisor views. The eight students taking the level III dissertation module represented all degree combinations within the business school, whilst the six supervisors encompassed a wide range of supervisory and subject experience. For both samples, perceptions and expectations of the quality of the supervisory process were established and recorded separately. This resulted in two templates, one illustrating the students' and the other the supervisors' perceptions and expectations. Some of the characteristics captured by the students' template included 'Advice', 'Feedback', 'Relationship – trust' and 'Information – quality' (see Figure 1) were not captured in the same words in the supervisors' template (see Figure 2). Conversely, characteristics in the supervisors' template, such as 'Student motivation', did not appear in the students' template.

Both perceptions and expectations were recorded against the 10-point scale. Consistency of interpretation of the scales was explored as the perceptions and expectations for each characteristic were plotted, as well as during interpretation and validation. Within each meeting, differences between individuals' scores for perceived and expected performance were recorded for each characteristic. These were represented by the length of the perceived performance and expected performance bars. For example, there was considerably more variation in students' perceptions of the 'Availability of tutor' than in their expectations (Figure 1). The gap between students'

expectation that the research methods 'Workshops time' should 'reflect dissertation progress/ongoing' and their perception that they were 'lumped together' emphasized the actual gap between their perceptions and expectations (Figure 1). The scores revealed those characteristics considered most important by students ('Advice', 'Feedback' and 'Relationship-trust') and supervisors ('Assessment criteria clarity', 'Student's commitment to topic' and 'Student's attitude/preparedness').

Subsequently, all involved explored the templates jointly. This enabled the students and supervisors to begin to develop a shared understanding of the range of views. Discussion was introduced by a short presentation from students and supervisors explaining their own templates and the high-scoring characteristics. Each participant was provided with copies of both templates and necessary clarifications sought. Following the presentations, these students and supervisors chose to discuss and explore the supervision process collectively, focusing on the major differences and similarities of the high scoring characteristics and the gaps between perceptions and expectations (Figures 1 and 2).

There were clear concerns for both students and supervisors. Students highlighted the consistency of the supervisory process. This is apparent in the relatively high score (25) of the characteristic 'Advice' as well as the wide range of perceptions for many other characteristics (Figure 1). The ideal for 'Advice' was 'consistent level playing field', and these terms were repeated frequently throughout the discussion. Concerns of supervisors centred upon assessment criteria; apparent in the characteristics: 'Assessment criteria – clarity' and 'Assessment criteria – objective measurement' (Figure 2). For both, the relatively wide range of perceptions suggested differences in views. Subsequent discussion highlighted further differences. Whereas supervisors indicated that support might not reasonably be 'readily available', their perceptions emphasized wide variation in practice (Figure 2). In contrast, students expected support should 'reflect individual student need' and 'sufficient "quality time"' should be available, whilst perceiving wide variations in practice (Figure 1).

As part of the meeting we asked student and supervisors to record the 'main messages' from the templates and suggest 'actions that would really make a difference'. This resulted in, for example, an agreement to reschedule research methods workshops to reflect more closely the stages students should have reached in their dissertations. Supervisors agreed to explore issues of consistency of advice at a subsequent staff development session. This highlighted that there was more agreement regarding the nature of the dissertation than supervisors had assumed and that the discussion was helpful in developing a common understanding. However, further work was needed on consistency of advice, in particular the amount of help that

should reasonably be given to students. A working group considered this subsequently.

Discussion

The Template Process allowed students and lecturers to generate independently those characteristics they believed were important to a defined teaching and learning situation. Subsequently, gaps between perceptions and expectations for each characteristic were tested and recorded. The process therefore offers a method for establishing valid information considered important, rather than reflecting the assumptions and values of the evaluation instrument designer. Despite an apparent lack of commonality in the language used by students and lecturers, there were often elements of common ground in the important characteristics. Where this was not the case, it emphasized that students and lecturers were operating within differing assumptions and norms. The Template Process therefore enables issues to be surfaced that may challenge the established modes of teaching and learning.

These observations reinforce the use of the Template Process within a process consultation framework, the facilitator acting as guardian of the process. Her or his role is to ensure that both students and lecturers contribute fully to template generation and validation (Phase II). During the subsequent exploration, learning and possible action (Phase III), the facilitator helps focus dialogue on both learning and action. She or he must therefore be able to listen to individuals' contributions, summarize alternative views and judge when to move the process towards identifying possible actions. Colleagues who have undertaken this role have commented that the skills required are similar to those they use when leading seminar groups. However, the requirement for the facilitator to be, and to be seen to be, neutral means that she or he is unlikely to be part of the module team.

The advantages of the Template Process appear to be greatest for modules where problems or issues related to quality are evident but defined poorly. In such instances the process allows students and lecturers to define the issue independently in their own words. Visual representation of the data facilitates confrontative intervention as students and lecturers explore each other's views (Phase III). By doing this jointly, differences and similarities in the norms and values upon which these ideas are based are highlighted leading to new mutual understandings specific to that situation. Participant interpretation and dialogue help maintain data integrity and ensure that the level and nature of detail available is sufficient upon which to act. The discursive nature of this phase also allows different views to be discussed, understood and recognized within the specified context.

The Template Process is, compared to traditional means of evaluating quality, time consuming for both the students and the lecturers involved. For this reason it has been used only on a maximum of one module per year group for a course, either as an integral part of teaching (for example in modules on research methods or managing service operations), where there appears to be an issue or problem that is poorly defined, or in the context of a more major review. Subsequently, the characteristics identified as important have been incorporated in more traditional evaluation methods. We have found that students enjoy the interactive aspects of developing their templates and subsequently working with lecturers to develop possible actions to improve quality. The majority have commented that they found the process engaging and that, unlike more traditional methods of evaluation, their contributions were really valued. In addition, by introducing variety to the methods of evaluation used across a course, student fatigue with more traditional approaches appears to be reduced.

In conclusion, the Template Process reflects the reality of a dyadic interchange between students and lecturers in teaching and learning. It is not intended to provide a statistically representative evaluation. Rather, it offers an additional tool to the range of existing quality assessment processes. The process enables students and lecturers to test their assumptions about an existing module independently prior to developing a common understanding of any problems or issues and possible actions. Because predetermined scales are not used, the process is applicable without modification to evaluating quality across a range of teaching and learning situations. The facilitator's role is to assist in the derivation, exploration and subsequent dialogue about the templates and agreement of possible courses of action. The process therefore offers an additional tool that, although time-consuming for those involved, captures the data in a systematic manner. Integral to the process is the need for discussion, understanding and learning about problems and issues and taking ownership of agreed solutions – aspects whose importance has been highlighted in the maintenance and enhancement of quality.

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