

Creating Collaborative Advantage Through Students' Quality Circles

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Abstract

Turkey has played a pioneering role in the Quality movement in both industry and education, providing sound foundations for current development processes. Students' Quality Circles, or Imece Circles, have provided a focus in Turkey and internationally. In the context of Knowledge Society and Knowledge Economy, new forms of work organisation offer collaborative advantage.

Keywords: collaboration, empowerment, Imece, Quality, social capital, Students' Quality Circles

Introduction

In the globalised Knowledge Society and Knowledge Economy, we need to consider new forms of work organisation, and new ways in which innovations can flow between sectors and across borders. It is now widely accepted that individual enterprise is not enough, and building social capital is vital for encouraging entrepreneurship and regional development. We talk of learning organisations and organisational learning, yet we rarely consider schools and universities as vital sources of innovation regarding work organisation. This represents a challenge for the Quality movement, and the need to focus on empowerment rather than top-down control.

The paper considers a series of educational innovations in countries around the world, which are now linked through the World Council for Total Quality and Excellence in Education. It would be misleading to give the impression of a single linear path of development, as we can encounter diverse routes to apparently similar outcomes. There is much to be learned from differences. We highlight innovative developments in Turkey, which we locate in an international context.

We talk of the creation of “collaborative advantage”, and see it as a way of enabling individuals and groups to compete in a demanding market society. Modern markets are the consequences of decisions by governments and others in power. Traditional markets are about people coming together to share knowledge and trade goods. By coming together in the context of learning, we can also be market forces.

Country Cases

The central realisation is that workers and learners can take ownership of their knowledge and skill, and form self-managed groups to take forward processes of continuous improvement.

This is particularly important, once we recognise that explicit knowledge forms only the tip of the knowledge iceberg (Göransson et al 2006). Much knowledge which is crucial for organisations is implicit or tacit. Individuals develop and use their knowledge in the context of groups. If one individual leaves, it should be possible for colleagues to have had access to much shared knowledge. Without that access, the departure of an individual, whether through retirement, automation, downsizing or outsourcing, can damage an organisation. These problems are intensified by demographic change, and an ageing workforce (Ennals and Salomon 2011).

This recognition of the importance of knowledge was the basis for the introduction of Quality Circles in the Japanese automobile industry, by Kauro Ishikawa (1990), who was concerned to counteract the excessive pressure of top-down Taylorist scientific management. He saw workers as a vital source of bottom up improvement. This collective approach was adopted in Japan, but proved hard to transplant to other business cultures, where managers dominated.

In some countries, such as the UK, the influence of the Quality Movement has tended to be as a provider of management control tools, leading to a compliance culture, and an alienation of workers from the production process. In effect, Taylorism was re-introduced, rather than being replaced. Relations of trust between managers and workers were weakened. There is an alternative approach to Quality, following Ishikawa (Hutchins 2008).

In Norway, initiatives based on Quality provided a common language for companies collaborating in networks as part of regional development programmes (Haga 2007; Nolin 2009). This facilitated innovation, in terms of process innovation and new ways of working. The ethos of partnership, bottom up development, and open communication fitted the Norwegian model of working life (Johnsen and Ennals 2011).

The Indian owner-manager of City Montessori School in Lucknow visited Japan in 1992, and introduced Students' Quality Circles into his school, which has become the largest in the world, and host of an international organisation active in 25 countries. Visitors to conventions have been astounded by the confidence with which school students could work in consultancy groups and make presentations to large audiences, in fluent English. This suggested that there was considerable untapped potential, and not just in India, also in Nepal (Chapagain 2006).

Following encounters with Students' Quality Circles at conventions in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Mauritius, Nepal and Turkey, efforts have been made since 2005 to develop Students' Quality Circles in Higher Education, at Kingston Business School, UK. There has been a particularly enthusiastic response from international students, in a faculty where students come from 106 countries. They have welcomed the opportunity to find a voice (Nahai et al 2011; Baligadoo 2011).

Turkey

In Turkey, the introduction of Students' Quality Circles, or "İmece Circles", accompanied the spread of the Quality Movement in industry in a rapidly modernising country, bridging Europe and Asia. Both in industry and in education, Quality has been part of the modernisation process since the late 1990s. The annual ICT Seagulls Project, open to all age groups, is hosted in Istanbul, enabling sharing of experience across borders. Within eight years, the Project has supported 260 İmece Circles, not only within Turkey, but also in other countries such as India, Nepal, South Africa, USA and UK.

Turkish schools encountered Quality philosophy and its applications in the first years of the 21st Century. Taking the lead from industrial organisations, some academics have taken interest. One of the first awareness creating books was “Schools of Quality”, by J.J. Bonstingl, translated into Turkish by Dr Koksall (2000). The aim was to attract the attention of schools to the continuous improvement process which forms the backbone of the Quality movement. SQCs were then formed in Turkey under the local name of İmece Circles in 2001; imece (collaboration) was an important cultural concept in Anatolia, especially in villages. Thw Quality Circles (İmece Circles) philosophy was adapted from the business world. Two Turkish High School Circles participated in an international online project, and won a gold medal at the 2002 Expo in South Africa.

Dr. Koksall has used SQC methodology in her public speaking course at the Foreign Languages Education Department of the Educational Faculty of Boğaziçi University, and in her International ICT Seagulls Project, starting from 2003. “İmece Circles in Schools and Classrooms to Realise Unity in Education” (Koksall 2004) included eleven SQC cases from Boğaziçi and Yıldız Technical Universities. Dr Koksall was recognised by the World Bank in 2005 for her İmece Circles methodology. Between 2004 and 2009, she advised Microsoft Turkey on the Innovative Teachers Project of Partners in Learning Programmes. She trained 150 innovative teachers, innovative coaches and school leaders with the Collaboration of Ministry of National Education and Microsoft Turkey. The teachers and teacher trainees conducted ICT projects using Virtual Classroom Tour (VCT) Format, and learned how to apply İmece Circles / SQC to their ICT Projects.

Now ICT Seagulls are in their 8th year. Starting from Kindergartens, secondary schools, high schools, universities (Boğaziçi, Istanbul, Ege, Muğla, Bilgi), schools of gifted students (TEVİTOL) and NGO teams (Educational volunteers Association_www.tegv.org.tr and some Societies for the Disabled) have taken part. In 2007, 175 secondary school teachers were trained as ICT Seagulls co-ordinators of their towns and cities, resulting in 93 SQC projects. In 2008, Istanbul was the host city of the 11th International Convention on Students’ Quality Circles / ICSQCC, with Dr. Koksall as convener at Yeditepe University. The Convention Book (258 pp.) including CD, was published with support from UNESCO Turkey in 2009.

New Applications

In some cases, having explored particular problems in the system, students gain in understanding, but continue in their previous work or courses of study. In other cases, experience of engagement in addressing a particular project serves to empower individuals and groups for further activities, in which they continue to be self-managing.

Pilot Students’ Quality Circles at Kingston Business School, addressing problems related to their practical experience of learning, are now leading to diverse new applications, both in Higher Education and in business. SQCs at Kingston will participate in the ICT Seagulls Project, taking a wider international role.

In Turkey, İmece Circles methodology is being taught to future professionals including teachers, engineers, architectures, and MBA holders. A course on Nonviolence in Education is being given for future teachers, forming more Circles.

To include disabled adult circles, a new project with Spinal Cord Paralytics Association started in August 2010. At Hüsnü Ayık Nursery Home of TOFD in Gürpınar, 14 spinal cord paralytics are trained to apply İmece Circles' Philosophy to feel happier and more fruitful. Four psychology students from Bilgi University are assisting. After the programme, the volunteers will take a Certificate Programme, "Leadership Academy for the Disabled". The curricula for the disabled, for the trainers and for the families have been developed.

In South Africa, there is interest in Students' Quality Circles as one approach to improving Quality in Higher Education, increasing the level of engagement from students (Bam-Hutchison 2011). The University of Fort Hare provided education for many in the liberation struggle, and values of partnership and co-operation continue. In other member countries of the Southern African Development Community, the tradition of working in groups or cells was strong, and SQCs may fit better with local cultures than has been the case with individualised approaches to education.

In Sweden, the power generation company Vattenfall are interested in developing Students' Quality Circles in Adult Education and Training on Safety, in control rooms of nuclear power plants. If this is successful, partner power companies could adopt the approach. Vattenfall respect the experience, skill and tacit knowledge of their workers (Berglund 2011), and see SQCs as a context in which this knowledge can become accessible.

Also in Sweden, there have been pilot applications in the voluntary sector, initiated by Kingston graduate Sophie Österberg, in a home for drug abusers, and to address problems of mental illness among children. In place of conventional top-down management, there is a need for individuals to feel able to work with others in groups, taking co-ownership of problems which can seem too big for one person to bear.

Challenges

Real change may begin after the first modest case study, which builds confidence. In schools, pupils may often revert to a conventional curriculum. In universities and workplaces, experience of autonomy and shared control of the agenda can open up new possibilities, resulting in institutional change. In the context of a Higher Education system in crisis, it is exciting to have access to a viable alternative way forward.

As innovative movements develop, there can be a tendency for founding figures to be proprietorial. In the case of Students' Quality Circles, this can limit the extent to which circles are truly autonomous. If the ethos of the movement is to be maintained, active participants need to play a part in setting future directions. Succession planning is important, at each level, empowering the younger generation.

In a globalised world, collaborations can be developed across borders. Joint working need not always involve physical presence in the same place. If partners share commitments and understandings, there can be joint outcomes. The scale of the international movement exceeds the capacity of single venues. Travel costs tend to exclude poorer students. Kingston is due to host the International Convention on Students' Quality Circles in 2014. By that time, innovation must make it possible for all to participate, in one way or another, without financial obstacles. One obvious answer is to build collaboration between education and industry around SQCs, for mutual benefit.

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