

ARE STUDENTS CUSTOMERS? THE METAPHORIC MISMATCH BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

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Many educational institutions have reconceptualized their relationships with students to conform with principles of total quality management (TQM). One facet of this orientation has been to portray students as customers and treat them accordingly. The metaphor of students as customers does place students at the center of the educational process, where they belong. This advantage, however, is outweighed by the dissimilarities between commercial transactions and education. Placing education on the level of a commercial transaction compromises the goals of education by (1) defining customers too narrowly, (2) confusing short-term satisfaction with long-term learning, and (3) insufficiently accounting for student-teacher interaction.

As teachers, we encourage our students to examine the way they use language. Too often, we sidestep this recommendation and avoid subjecting our own linguistic habits to critical scrutiny. This essay examines the equation of students with customers, an equivalence that has gained popularity as total quality management (TQM) has infused educational institutions. Increasingly, metaphors that originate beyond education are being imported to describe and direct educational processes. The importation of terminology from management theory raises several issues central to how education is conceptualized and practiced.

Closer attention to the student-as-customer metaphor generates warnings about the unreflective transfer of language from business to education. By exploring the limits of "student as customer" or "student as consumer," the range of the metaphor's applicability to education will be tested. Does conceptualizing students as customers represent a useful extension of management terminology to education, or does it resemble a "colonization," an attempt "to impose a foreign worldview, as a language shapes reality for those who use it" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 125)?

The Application of Management Theory to Education

The first sentence in a recent book describing the application of total quality management to higher education states: "problems in American higher education can be directly attributed to the lack of vision, lack of insight, and the lack of skill of many administrators who lacked any formal, even informal, management training" (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 7). Presumably, training in management will solve problems in higher education because they are attributable to the absence of such training. Naturally this pronouncement fails to account for several factors. Many businesses, the primary repositories of trained managers, routinely encounter problems no amount of management training can solve. Furthermore, higher education fared quite well for centuries before the term 'management' was applied to business and before management courses found their way into college catalogues.

The total quality movement in education extends W. Edwards Deming's philosophy of management from manufacturing to service-oriented settings (Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994). By the 1990s, the battle cry of competition resounded in educational circles much

as it did for American industries in the 1980s (Coate, 1993). TQM now has become "the rage" in higher education (Fisher, 1993, p. 15). Responding to market pressures similar to those that had operated on American corporations, educational reformers have seen an urgent need for America to keep pace with other industrialized nations in basic skills. Inefficiency, reduced competitiveness with other nations (Beaver, 1994), and dissatisfaction with performance closely resembled complaints leveled against American businesses. Similar problems seem to mandate similar solutions. If TQM could work for American business, it could work for American education.

Customer orientation forms a cornerstone of TQM philosophy. Quality is defined in terms of customer satisfaction: the customer's judgment not only determines how quality is measured but how it is defined in the first place (Peters, 1987; Fenwick, 1992). In higher education, the vocabulary of TQM brings assumptions of equivalencies: students are customers or consumers, and educational institutions should apply principles of customer service gleaned from businesses. Given the success of TQM in reducing defects in manufacturing and in improving customer service, the question arises: "If we can do it for widgets, why not for students?" (Brigham, 1993, p. 47) The record of TQM's effects in service industries has been spottier than in manufacturing, so some commentators have urged caution in applying total quality concepts to education (Brigham, 1993; Keller, 1992; Fisher, 1993). The issue of how well the language and methods of corporate management apply to higher education assumes great importance, especially as colleges and universities face financial straits and competition similar to those plaguing American businesses. Whether TQM should extend to higher education has been considered "the most pressing question of the TQM movement" (Keller, 1992, p. 50).

The treatment of students as customers does have advantages. Many educational institutions

do suffer from territoriality and lack of accountability. Departments often become compartments, each pursuing its own objectives, duplicating efforts and wasting energy, oblivious to students or contemptuous of them. Almost every student can tell a depressing tale of being ignored or treated as a nuisance rather than as the cornerstone of education. If an emphasis on quality is geared to improving cooperation among all stakeholders in education, from trustees to faculty to students, its objective is certainly worthwhile. Most important, investing students with a definite role—one more respectful and central than "necessary evil"—recognizes them as participants in the educational process instead of passive recipients of whatever the institution decides to dish out. Every day, faculty, staff, and administrators should recognize their obligation to serve others (Marchese, 1993), be they colleagues who need more efficiently processed purchase orders or students who appreciate their phone calls being returned promptly. The goal of total quality appears laudable, indeed incontestable (Fisher, 1993). The implications of its terminology, however, are quite ambivalent.

TQM certainly can improve some aspects of higher education, namely those that provide specific services to students. The areas of institutions that conduct discrete business-like transactions—e.g., student services, registration, food services, maintenance—do seem amenable to streamlining and improvement via TQM methods. TQM implementers at colleges and universities often recommend starting quality initiatives with services such as maintenance and data processing because they have close analogues in business (Coate, 1991). Not surprisingly, these environments most closely resemble the business settings to which total quality was originally applied. The success stories of TQM in education often deal with these areas where performance can be measured easily and benchmark standards are readily available (Beaver, 1994).

When management philosophies enter teaching and learning, however, the transfer from business may be rougher. The central matter to consider is whether envisioning students as customers has advantages in educational settings where the students participate in the learning process. Education, unlike individual transactions such as registering for classes, involves an ongoing process heavily dependent on the student's willingness to participate in learning (Beaver, 1994). After considering the implications and assumptions of configuring students as customers, a larger point looms. Why should the corporate world generate the linguistic framework for educational processes? Phrased a bit differently, analysis of the "student as consumer" perspective might spark renewed interest in refining the definition of students. Education then could proceed by conceptualizing students as students rather than recasting them in the image of business.

The Role of Metaphors in Educational Practice

For the metaphoric equivalence of students with customers to be informative, it must reveal the limits of the analogy. Knowing how the metaphor can be taken allows it to be used more prudently, within its domain of applicability. With this objective in mind, the language of consumerism should not be grafted so enthusiastically onto the practice of education. According to studies of how metaphors are processed, such an unproblematic overlay would not provoke the necessary cognitive "recoil" to examine the various dimensions of the relationship between students and customers (Osborn & Ehninger, 1962, p. 231). Like organ transplants, however, imported terminology can be rejected by the host. In this case the host is education, and the rejection is not so much negative reactions from educators as the fundamental dissimilarities that persist between education and business despite metaphoric alliances. Metaphorically apply-

ing the concept of customer to students represents far more than a simple overlay or grafting. Cognitively rich metaphors do not arise from merely substituting one term (e.g., *customer*) for another (e.g., *student*). Instead of simply overlaying the concept of customer onto that of student, the metaphorically conjoined ideas intersect in some ways and diverge in others. The fundamental point is that any conceptual importation of a tenor, or descriptive term (i.e., *customer*), also carries with it some of the historical roots, connotations, and uses from its realm of origination. Persistent incompatibilities between the realm of business and the realm of education render the application of consumer metaphors to education problematic. A metaphoric predication is not an absolute identification of one thing as another, but the juxtaposition of concepts whose dissimilarities as well as similarities invite contemplation (Marías, 1967). Metaphors are much more than mere terminological borrowings that replace one field's vocabulary with that of another.

If metaphors represent "a structural change in a field of meanings" (Gerhart & Russell, 1994, p. 95), then the configuration of students as customers has significant consequences for how all interpersonal relationships in education are conceived. Metaphors are not mere by-products of history but have consequences for subsequent understanding. In short, a metaphoric configuration can instigate "a structural change which demands that other meanings and understandings have to be changed in the wake of the metaphor" (Gerhart & Russell, 1984, p. 119). The student-as-customer metaphor certainly gains significance from its historical conjuncture with total quality management philosophy. The question is how the future of educational practice might be affected in the wake of metaphors derived from management philosophies.

Metaphoric choices have consequences. Insofar as they influence how experience is structured and interpreted, metaphors are not

value-neutral (Sederberg, 1984). Metaphors can generate cognitive insights, but they can constrict as well as expand interpretive possibilities. Once a metaphor becomes literalized, the creative act of blending categories becomes a restrictive understanding of one category only in terms of another. The metaphoric transference of some business principles to education might improve the educational process. Who could argue with improving service or with taking the needs of students into account? On the other hand, the business mindset can render education a mere commodity if students are understood solely as customers who must be pleased without exerting any effort in the process. A useful metaphoric perspective of thinking of students *as if* they were customers can narrow to an understanding that students *are* customers—and nothing more.

The Elusive Customer

Before determining how to satisfy the customer, it must be determined who qualifies as the customer of education. Difficulties persist in identifying which customers should be satisfied and what might count as satisfaction. A major barrier to implementing TQM programs in educational settings has been that “colleges and universities have no clear understanding of who the customers, either internal or external, are” (Winter, 1991, p. 59). Quality management principles and methods offer little help here. Identification of students as the customers of higher education has been called “incomplete” because, since education affects society at large, “the ultimate consumers or users of education are the national and international communities” (Rinehart, 1993, p. 57). In striving to maximize customer satisfaction, institutions are encouraged “to stretch the standard definition of ‘customer’ to include all persons or organizations who are affected” by education (Seymour, 1993, p. 48). Exactly how far removed from the educational process must someone be to qualify as a customer? TQM

theorists approach this question by distinguishing internal from external customers. The internal customers consist of people within the institution who receive products or services provided by other members of the organization (Sallis, 1993). For example, the professor of Advanced Public Speaking is a customer of the professor who teaches Basic Public Speaking. The professor who teaches the prerequisite course supplies students to the professor in the advanced course. External customers are equivalent to the end users of a product or service (Fenwick, 1992; Tomlin, 1994). Immediately the internal/external distinction poses problems because their terminology is inconsistent. When considering internal customers, the students become products or merchandise passed from provider to customer. Students are considered “a human resource that is being developed for the external customers of education” (Rinehart, 1993, p. 62). Pleasing the internal customer in this case would mean satisfying the professor, while pleasing the external customer could bypass or contradict the professor’s interests. As for external customers, exactly who counts as an end user: those who receive the education, those who pay for it, or those affected by its applications? Depending on the context, the definition of the customer shifts. In a single set of interactions, the roles that members of an educational institution assume are so intertwined that “everyone in the organization is both a supplier and a customer” (Sherr & Lozier, 1991, p. 8).

Even the proponents of TQM recognize that several parties may qualify as the customer in educational settings. “An institution of higher education is a complex web of relationships, where any given person or office is both a customer and a supplier” (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 70). Such ambiguity would present few problems in everyday relationships, where interactions are multi-faceted. In the arena of management, however, the dictum to satisfy the customer becomes especially difficult to

obey if different groups of consumers have different needs and desires. Which categories of customers take precedence over others? Despite the need "to decide whose satisfaction should be measured" (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 88), the identification of customers still does not resolve whose opinions should receive highest priority. As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, the probability increases that some groups of students may have desires, needs, or interests that conflict with other groups (Beaver, 1994). Without a clearly defined method for prioritizing the needs of different types of customers, TQM could degenerate into a reinforcement of the values and procedures identified by the existing administrative hierarchy (Parker & Slaughter, 1994). Quality methods have no procedure for resolving inter-group conflicts because they assume that a consensual definition of quality can and will be reached.

The TQM model correctly identifies students as stakeholders in educational decisions. On the other hand, they are not the only stakeholders, and sometimes the interests of students must take a back seat to the needs of the community. Under the TQM framework, students operate as a market force to which educational institutions must adapt in order to survive. Such a portrayal of students, however, invests them with a misleadingly inflated sense of empowerment. Far from autonomously constituting the market force, students and the educational administration too often find themselves at the mercy of forces they neither originated nor control. For example, the state of South Carolina has attempted to implement a five percent budget cut to all state institutions, including colleges and universities. To say that students drive the market under such conditions misleads students into thinking they have far more clout than they actually do.

Is the Customer Always Right?

The literature on TQM in educational set-

tings equivocates when discussing "a user-based definition of quality" (Seymour, 1993, p. 43). Terminology shifts continuously between customer *wants* and customer *needs*, as if these concepts were interchangeable. For example, one TQM how-to manual for higher education claims that the central concept of quality is "giving customers what they want." In the same paragraph, the language subtly shifts to the argument that "need-satisfaction is the Holy Grail" (Seymour, 1993, p. 42). Another TQM guidebook claims: "The primary focus of any education institution should be the *needs* and views of its learners." Six pages later, the same work states: "Quality is what the customer *wants* and not what the institution decides is best for them" (Sallis, 1992, pp. 33, 39; emphasis added). A third discussion of TQM in educational settings advises organizing work "around the needs and preferences of *customers*" (Marchese, 1993, p. 13; emphasis in original), assuming that desires and requirements always coincide. Such equivocation has consequences far more significant than mere confusion.

If quality is defined in terms of student/customer *wants*, the vision of quality is short-sighted indeed. A student's immediate desires often consist of very short-term and self-serving goals: to pass a course, to graduate, to learn concepts and techniques whose immediate applicability to employment are manifest. Tom Peters issues a succinct caveat regarding perceptions of quality: "Caution: The Customer's Perception of Quality Can Be Perverse" (1987, p. 102). Most college classes have at least some students who can identify quality as an intellectually challenging assignment, for instance, yet refuse it when offered (Beaver, 1993). Catering only to what the students want at the moment presumes that in their expression of desires, students are fully informed (Sallis, 1992) and can express their desires unequivocally. The TQM literature recognizes that students' "perceptions of quality

change as they progress through the institution and their experience and confidence grows" (Sallis, 1992, p. 39). Given this fact, should a totally green freshman's perception of a good education shape the education he receives? One of the reasons students seek an education is to clarify their needs and desires or to establish their priorities. Because their judgement may not yet have matured, "students cannot be considered the primary customer of education for the purpose of educational quality, for this simple reason: students have no conception of what they must learn; they are, after all, students" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59). As mentioned previously, their "needs and desires may not match" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59). If the perceptions of more mature students are used as benchmarks, then one group of customers is beholden to the educational vision of a different group. The question then arises: "Which customer should the academic community listen to?" (Beaver, 1994, p. 112) If one constituency's desires dominate, then a hegemonic group of customers replaces the overly directive institution.

The objection might arise that the preceding description of student wants is more a caricature than a faithful rendition. Indeed, most students do take education quite seriously. If students have not yet clarified their needs and desires, that condition by no means renders them "mere" students whose concerns carry no weight. The problem is that even the most serious students may have insufficient frames of reference to determine their educational preferences in relation to some larger context: careers not yet begun, families not yet started, communities not yet entered. Students lack the expertise to judge exactly what constitutes quality in a particular subject (Beaver, 1994), although they certainly have the competence to recognize degrees of courtesy, promptness, and reliability that generalize across disciplines. The equation of satisfied desires with quality commits what could be termed the hedonistic fallacy: a faulty equivalence between wants

and goods. People naturally want many things that may not be in their long-term best interest. Plato (1953, III.402e), sharply distinguishing pleasure from virtue, was quick to warn against equating the satisfaction of desire with doing what is best. Phrased in terms more adapted to the marketplace, "what is 'right' cannot be defined in any terms other than what will sell" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 129). While such a categorical definition might qualify as an overstatement, it does highlight the conflation of popularity with merit. A confusion between short-term pleasure and long-term good becomes especially likely with statements such as: "Delighting the customers is the purpose of TQM" (Sallis, 1992, p. 126). An analogy from medicine illustrates the difference. The sick person may want to eat candy instead of take medicine, but does that mean such a desire should be indulged at the expense of health? TQM uncritically accepts the student/customer's subjective perception of quality as unassailable (Seymour, 1993). The educational system therefore must adapt to perceptions that might be unrealistic, irrelevant, or not fully developed because "the customer is always right." Ironically, this version of staying close to the customer can buy immediate satisfaction at the expense of long-term best interest.

Despite the problems associated with giving customers what they want, the fulfillment of needs fares no better. Needs, in the context of education, consist of the minimum necessary human elements that must be satisfied to retain the student. If a student's needs are not satisfied, if she lacks what she *must* have to continue, then the student does not return or does not graduate. Not coincidentally, student services TQM programs are deemed successful if they increase student retention. Need satisfaction, therefore, is oriented toward baseline performance, providing students with what they cannot do without. Fulfillment of wants, on the other hand, guides educational practice

to best case scenarios as defined by the students. While needs take the form of bare necessities, wants have the character of higher standards or ideals.

It would seem that needs, far more than desires, would be intersubjective, recognizable and specifiable by all the stakeholders in education. If needs are the basic essentials, then they can be enumerated not only by the students but by faculty, administrators, parents, boards of trustees, the local community, alumni, and prospective employers. Recognized needs tend to be long-term requirements and as such may be recognized only in the long run, after the thrill of college social activities has faded. In educational policy, need satisfaction often has taken the form of emphasizing basic skills that students might not *want* to stress despite their later recognition of *needing* these skills. Fulfillment of needs, however, raises serious questions regarding the relationship between quality and excellence. Gearing education to needs places the focus on fundamental requirements that might prove necessary for learning, but resemble minimal requirements more than ultimate objectives. For example, a student certainly should expect everyone in an educational setting to treat her with courtesy and respect. Such a requirement, both for the student and for the institution, constitutes a core assumption instead of a benchmark for outstanding achievement. Meeting a student's needs, which could be defined simply as the levels of self-preservation that occupy the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy, is necessary but not sufficient for assuring quality (Horton, 1981; Sallis, 1992).

Aside from failing to encourage better teaching or learning, the idea of quality in relation to student-customers is ideologically naive. "User-defined" definitions of quality are not innocent evaluations of a product or service, totally devoid of social contexts and political agendas. People naturally like what gives them pleasure, and all too often pleasure arises from

encountering confirmation of pre-existing beliefs. A perception of high-quality education, therefore, may amount to a reinforcement of the very prejudices and provincialism that learning is designed to overcome. It is no coincidence that state legislatures assail the quality of public education when they encounter courses and curricula that challenge "mainstream" political sentiments, with the mainstream defined as the positions of the legislators themselves. According to such a standard, "quality" education, far from challenging students by exposing them to the lively marketplace of different ideas, constricts young minds by insulating them from intellectual novelty, avoiding different viewpoints, and stifling innovative departures from tradition and authority. In this dystopian vision of educational quality, educational institutions mirror existent beliefs. The better the quality of education, the more precisely it reflects "the way things oughtta be" as defined by particular political interests.

Conclusion

Although fostering quality in education sounds incontestable, transferring management conceptions of quality to educational environments poses serious problems. Difficulties with transposing terminology from business to education run deeper than the words themselves. Since the choice of metaphors reflects and shapes reactions to social reality, superficial adjustments to terms will not shed the implicit connotations outlined in this paper. While switching to the student-as-customer metaphor was recognized at one university as "not just a change in semantics, but a change of culture," resistance to the terminology was countered by a simplistic semantic switch: "We often substitute the word client for customers" (Coate, 1993, p. 315). If the client metaphor substantially differs from the customer orientation, then that terminological change deserves attention. If not, then the alteration has no significance, since it retains the management

connotations that run counter to the goals and process of education.

TQM has been implemented successfully at many universities. The tallies of results, however, consistently omit any comments about the quality of education within and beyond the classroom. Money has been saved, procedures have been streamlined. As for teaching and learning, however, the cost of treating students as customers carries mixed blessings. Even if students can be understood as customers in some contexts, they deserve more from educators than instant gratification. If students are envisioned only or primarily as consumers, then educators assume the role of panderers, devoted more to immediate satisfaction than to offering the challenge of intellectual independence.

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