

THE QUALITY CIRCLE IN THE CLASSROOM:
AN EXPERIMENT IN THE TEACHING OF ASIAN HISTORY

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In recent years the impressive productivity level achieved by Japanese industry has attracted world-wide interest.¹ Current preoccupation with Japanese expertise is reflected in the best-seller status recently attained by Pascale's and Athos's The Art of Japanese Management and by William Ouchi's Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge.² Wall Street managers have even made a "hot issue" of The Book of Five Rings, a classic written by the legendary samurai warrior Miyamoto Musahi in 1645 which is catching on with financial experts today as a sort of life-style guide.³

Perhaps the best known and most widely emulated of current Japanese imports is the "quality control circle," a method of directly involving teams of cooperating workers and managers in the process of planning and problem-solving. Groups of eight to twelve workers and supervisors volunteer to gather each week in brainstorming sessions that focus upon problems encountered on the job. It is estimated that there are one million such circles in Japan enrolling over eleven million people, all of whom share a sense of participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.⁴

So successful has the technique proved in Japan that American companies have begun to experiment with it during the past two years, among them Ford, Westinghouse, Bethlehem Steel, and Martin Marietta. Although some critics have derided quality circles as nothing more than "a dressed up suggestion box," the skeptics appear to be in the minority.⁵ Most observers agree with the Westinghouse vice president who stated after sixteen months of experience with quality circles that "this is one of those rare programs that benefit everyone."⁶

While all existing models of the circle are industrial,⁷ there are many who feel that the quality circle philosophy could be applied in a variety of situations. Inasmuch as the circle concept rests on the premise that everyone who feels the impact of a decision should be involved in making it,⁸ the senior high or college classroom presents a potentially significant testing-ground. Circle volunteers, according to the testimony of industrial managers, derive an enhanced sense of responsibility from participation, along with an unparalleled opportunity for personal growth and recognition. Such obvious congruence with the goals most educators also espouse justifies the introduction of the quality circle into the classroom, at least experimentally.

Last year I set up a quality circle in my history classroom at the Ogontz Campus, a freshman-sophomore center of the Pennsylvania State University. In the course of my reading on the subject of Japanese management techniques, I discovered that Pascale and Athos believe that "consultative decisions result in better decisions," and that "the key is to find common ground and take others' points and use them effectively."⁹ Accepting these premises as compatible with my own philosophy of teaching and convinced that an active role by students was infinitely preferable to the passive pose characteristic of so many, I set up a single quality circle of eight students in one of my classes, with plans to expand the program in future terms if the experiment proved successful.

Appropriately, the class was an introductory one in the history of traditional East Asia, with its principal focus upon China and Japan before 1800. For my quality circle I selected eight students whom I knew well from

previous courses, although I am now certain that the experiment would have worked equally with volunteers. The circle met weekly during the one-hour common lunch break built into our schedule.

At our first meeting I described the function of the quality circle and explained that we were jointly going to explore its potential for improving student and teacher performance. I told the students that their input would be crucial and that I would not only accept the group's decisions as final in matters affecting classroom management and routine, but that I would also implement all recommendations on which they could agree. I informed them too that I would routinely preview with them material I intended to teach in the week ahead and that I would solicit their opinions on the optimum method of presentation.

From the start the eight students were enthusiastic and sincerely committed to the success of the experiment. At our first session we debated expanding the circle to include additional members of the class, but all eight insisted that they preferred the intimacy of a small group.¹⁰ To preclude any suggestion of elitism, however, we decided that each of the eight would keep three members of the class informed about our weekly activities. The circle member would encourage input from each of his three assignees which could in turn be laid before the QC at its next meeting for discussion. The circle thus proved to be wonderfully elastic, as it could be easily stretched from time to time with no loss of intimacy.

One of the first of the QC suggestions that I implemented was the distribution of a daily class outline, complete with glossary of important names, dates, and terms. Because of their unfamiliarity with Asian history students found the textbook confusing and my lectures sometimes difficult to follow. These problems, discussed within the friendly confines of the circle, led to the recommendation of the daily outline. And if preparation of the outline represented an occasionally onerous chore for me, it proved popular with the class as a whole, providing students with a guide to the most crucial developments of a particular period, helping them to use the text more efficiently, and enabling absentees to catch up more easily.

Another useful suggestion from the QC involved the introduction of "current events." In response to a student's casual remark that--immersed as we were in the ancient and medieval world--she sometimes longed for a glimpse of present-day Asia, I began to preface class sessions with anecdotes and news articles culled from specialized publications such as The Asia Record. One day it was an item about the return of Confucius to respectability in China. On another occasion it was a story about the death of a worker in Japan at the "hands" of a misprogrammed robot. Whatever the subject, these brief preambles often stimulated lively class discussions, serving perhaps to remind students that the descendants of the people about whom we were studying were alive and well and doing important things in the contemporary world.

At the start of the experiment it was I who drew up the weekly agenda and brought up specific questions for advice and resolution: frequency of examinations, requirements for outside reading, suitability of extra credit assignments, and so on. In every case the circle members demonstrated extraordinary good sense and judgment; and many of their recommendations were adopted by me for use in class. As the students became more comfortable in the circle setting, they themselves began to propose topics for discussion. For example, they scrutinized my presentation of subject matter carefully each week. I learned that they wanted me to bring poems, short stories, and art plates to class and to integrate them into my lectures, even at the expense of chronological coverage.

As the term went on, the course began to undergo subtle transformation. My customary preoccupation with the purely political and economic aspects of history gave way to a more humanistic approach, as I altered the focus of lectures to include more of the art and literature of ancient China and Japan. Much of the reshaping of the course occurred in almost unconscious response to the consensus emerging from QC sessions. Certainly I was careful never to surrender actual control of course content to my students. But in teaching as in life there are often a number of alternatives that are equally valid. Considering the vastness of the historical tapestry, many approaches are possible. What is important is talking through the alternatives and arriving at an understanding about which road to take out of the myriad that await exploration. Thus, if the students felt that pausing to read the poetry of Tu Fu or Li Po made them experience the T'ang era in China more deeply than would a detailed analysis of the taxing policies of the Ming Huang Emperor, then I was willing to accommodate, especially in an introductory course.

It is important to note that as group leader it is the instructor who assumes responsibility for course parameters and for setting limits on the range of alternatives that the circle will explore. As group leader one must hold one's own preference in suspension at times in order to remain a part of the process. It is the leader who must strive for the common ground, who must sense the proper moment to intervene in order to guide the discussion to shore, who must choose words with care in order to harmonize divergent perspectives, and who ultimately must integrate arguments within the framework of a mutually satisfying decision.¹¹ These are all skills that can be learned, but only with practice.

My first experiment with the quality circle was fruitful and well received by my students. "It is nice to know that some teachers care about what the student thinks good for a course," one student wrote in his evaluation of the QC experience. "I would like to see you continue the experiment, and I hope it spreads." Another student commented that "I feel it is an excellent way to remove the barrier that usually exists between teacher and class." And a third member of the circle wrote: "It is nice to know that the teacher cares about the class and what the students learn."

Because of such favorable evaluations I have continued to use the quality circle technique in subsequent terms, refining my methods and seeking to integrate the circle philosophy into all aspects of my teaching. The circle philosophy teaches us that by their inquiries, suggestions, and complaints students, like consumers, can plant the seeds for improvement, and that one half-good idea advanced by an individual can be improved upon incrementally by a group. It is in essence a "bottom-up" philosophy that imposes the heaviest burden upon the instructor who must invest not only time but emotional capital as well.

It is, for example, necessary to plan a weekly agenda, to think hard about choices, to become responsive to the subtleties of group interaction, and to discard familiar classroom procedures. It is also necessary to broaden one's way of thinking and responding, to embrace a shift to "other-directedness," and to cultivate what the Japanese call "less-ego listening." Ouchi writes that "often the skillful leader does more listening than talking. What matters most is the skill of observing, the pattern of interaction in the group, and knowing when to intervene."¹² Because there are no pedagogical models in existence and no guidelines to follow, there are pitfalls one learns to avoid. It must always be remembered that the quality circle is only a structure that one creates principally to implement basic pedagogical values, along with the specific goals and objectives of the course. One must guard against becoming so enmeshed in the mechanics of group management that this fact is forgotten.

A definition of values and goals must therefore precede the establishment of any structure designed to assist in their ultimate realization.

Is the experiment worth the time and effort it demands? At the end of my initial experience with the quality circle I evaluated the experiment in as objective a fashion as possible by drawing up a list of merits and failures. Foremost among the benefits was an increase in contact between teacher and student and a greater appreciation of each other's worth. The quality circle successfully communicates to students the sense that they are individually important and that their opinions matter. Giving students recognition for their special contributions is essential today, when the all-pervasive atmosphere of anomie so characteristic of a technologically-oriented society seeps inevitably into our classrooms.

Equally important among the benefits was the bonding that takes place among members. Trust, loyalty, and mutual commitment appear to be among the by-products of the shared experience. In practical terms my eight circle members clearly had a vested interest in making sure that the changes and innovations they had recommended would be successful in the classroom. Their enthusiasm enlivened the classroom, and their responsiveness transformed the emotional climate. Supportiveness, amiability, and old-fashioned good will are as contagious in a class as hostility and boredom. Moreover, enthusiastic participation by some leads to the greater involvement of all, even those who usually are content to sit silent and withdrawn.

Finally, students develop important decision-making skills and problem-solving techniques by participating in a quality circle, along with greater willingness to assume responsibility. Students see that there is a direct relationship between voluntary assumption of responsibility and the increased power over outcomes that flows from it. "Responsibility is learned by being given responsibility," Arthur Combs has recently written, "never by having it withheld." And further: "Learning responsibility requires confronting problems, making choices, being involved in decisions, accepting the consequences of one's actions, learning from mistakes - not with respect to artificial problems but real ones."¹³ If the decade of the eighties confronts educators with the challenge of an information explosion and a vastly accelerated rate of change in the world, then we must meet the challenge with new approaches to our students. The quality circle is one such approach, its special value clearly perceptible in critical areas such as problem-solving, development of a sense of responsibility, and greater personal involvement with others in cooperative settings.

It is perhaps necessary to sound a cautionary note or two. The quality circle may be limited in its application. It is probably more easily utilized in the college classroom than elsewhere. If it is attempted in the high school, its implementation should be preceded by careful planning and judicious scheduling. It may also be more suited for use by teachers of humanities than by scientists, engineers, or mathematicians. Where a specific body of factual material must be transmitted in a limited time and where certain incremental skills must be developed, then the circle technique may require extensive modification. I discovered, for example, that I did not cover quite as much in purely historical terms as I had in past terms. One must therefore be willing to trade off comprehensive coverage for an increase in student participation, a sacrifice less significant in some disciplines than others.

Most students arrive today in our classrooms with limited intellectual baggage and with little interest in the liberal arts. Any method that increases a student's involvement in the process of his own education--as

the quality circle appears to do--is well worth the commitment of time and energy it demands of the instructor. The QC philosophy has achieved important breakthroughs in the workplace within a very short time. It may do the same in our schools.

NOTES

¹See for example the report in Japan Economic Review (October 15, 1979), 8.

²Richard Tanner Pascale and Anthony Athos, The Art of Japanese Management (New York, 1981); William Ouchi, Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge (New York, 1981).

³Jacqueline Wilson, "Wall Street: A Strategy for Gentlemen Warriors," New York Times (September 13, 1981).

⁴Newsweek (September 8, 1980), 61.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Time (January 28, 1980), 65.

⁷For an experimental use of quality circles composed of administrators, staff, and faculty see Larry Romine, "Quality Circles That Enhance Productivity," Community and Junior College Journal (November, 1981). The experiment is under way at Lane Community College in Oregon.

⁸Ouchi, 37.

⁹Pascale and Athos, 111, 113.

¹⁰Interestingly Pascale and Athos confirm that "groups, as they increase in size beyond eight to ten people, have increasing difficulty in preserving personal and emotional correctness" (Ibid., 126).

¹¹Ibid., 132-33.

¹²Ouchi, 92.

¹³Arthur W. Combs, "What the Future Demands of Education," Phi Delta Kappan, 62 (January, 1981), 372.