

# Quality as empowerment: going around in circles

Richard Ennals

Received: 4 January 2012 / Accepted: 9 January 2012 / Published online: 21 January 2012  
© Springer-Verlag London Limited 2012

**Abstract** The article introduces a new international educational community based on Students' Quality Circles, in which industry and education have learned to collaborate for mutual benefit. In each country represented in this special issue, there have been distinctive bottom-up initiatives, informed by the experience of collaboration. We emphasise Quality as Empowerment.

**Keywords** Bottom-up · Collaborative advantage · Compliance · Continuous improvement · Empowerment · Students' Quality Circles · Top-down

## 1 Introduction

This journal special issue brings together articles from contributors from around the world, who have converged to form an international movement, based around the theory and practice of Students' Quality Circles. Over more than half a century, the lead has come from Asia, from Japan and then from India, and has international implications in a globalised world. Learning, work organisation and the use of technology all face challenges.

The focus of attention has been on Quality, giving fresh momentum to approaches which have been explored over many decades. Some have assumed that the Quality Movement was simply re-inventing top-down Taylorist Scientific Management. By contrast, we encounter examples of emancipation, and bottom-up processes of continuous improvement. Years after the debate seemed to have

subsided in industry, we have seen the emergence of a fresh approach to education. The articles in this special issue are based on practical experience.

## 2 Rival traditions

We can identify two rival traditions.

### 2.1 Quality as compliance

In the United Kingdom, we have become accustomed to "Quality as Compliance". We keep being asked to tick boxes and to demonstrate that we are following regulations. Those who take on this role of auditing our work are usually outsiders, often without personal experience of the work we are doing. Their task is to add Quality through the process of Inspection. They work top-down, in close association with management.

### 2.2 Quality as empowerment

In this second tradition, we see Quality as an essential part of our working life, and of our organisations. It is not simply an attractive veneer, added later. Quality is about people, the processes in which they engage, and the products or outcomes of their work. The way to enhance Quality is to empower people, enabling them to bring about change, bottom-up.

The work with Quality Circles and Students' Quality Circles, in the tradition of Ishikawa (1970), Hutchins (2008), Chapagain (2006), is distinctive. We are engaged in "Quality as Empowerment". Our starting point is respect for the experience, skill and tacit knowledge of the worker or student. We want to empower the individual worker or

---

R. Ennals (✉)  
Kingston Business School, Kingston University,  
Kingston Hill, Kingston KT2 7LB, UK  
e-mail: richard.ennals@gmail.com