



## **Does Assessment Automatically Lead to Improvement?**

By John R. Dew

Educators who study the quality sciences quickly encounter the concept of the Deming Cycle, created by W. Edwards Deming, as adapted to education: plan, do, study, act. The quality discipline teaches you how to properly collect and analyze data, and organize it to create and implement improvements, as well as address systemic issues within organizations that are vital for quality control and quality improvement. Proper analysis of data includes the understanding of common causes and special causes of variation in data.

Improvement is part of a cycle. As Joseph Juran noted, improvement happens in small increments, project by project, and in no other way. Factories, hospitals and schools that embrace the quality methods will engage the entire workforce in improving their work systems and processes, leading to hundreds or thousands of improvements. And, in addition to continuous improvement, these organizations typically embrace innovation, welcoming the introduction of new technology that helps achieve major breakthroughs.

The action is always at the local level—shop by shop, wing by wing, school by school, and academic department by department. Upper administration's job is to create the conditions that empower people to improve their system. As Deming would note, 85% of the problems in educational settings can only be addressed when the management of the system supports improvement by changing systemic conditions. The faculty can only influence about 15% of the problems in the system on their own.

The education field has made only marginal progress in embracing quality methods during the past 20 years. This is not surprising because quality methods are not taught in education administration programs and few administrators who come up through the ranks of academia have been exposed to quality improvement in other sectors.

On the other hand, there are parallel efforts within the education sector that make partial use of some quality methods. Those involved in the "scholarship of teaching" are engaged in systematic improvement of quality in processes that deal with learning. Similarly, those who



come from a framework known as “action research” are employing a systematic approach to improvement.

Nevertheless, there are some common issues that plague the education sector and are rooted in a lack of what Deming referred to as “profound knowledge.”

1. Educators have not defined what quality means and have not yet come to understand quality in terms of common causes and special causes of variation in a repeatable process. It is not in their body of knowledge.
2. Educators are rushing to embrace assessment without improvement. Millions of dollars are being spent on assessment schemes that are not connected with improvement methods. Assessment is an important part of the improvement cycle but does not accomplish anything by itself.
3. Government agencies that oversee education have not been able to decide if their role is to provide quality control or to stimulate quality improvement, which are two distinct types of action. Whether their role is to do one or the other or both, few understand anything about the quality discipline. In the last decade, government agencies have promoted policies that violate just about every principle of effective quality improvement that exists.
4. The confusion about quality control versus quality improvement flows down from the government to many accrediting agencies, confounding Deming’s admonition to drive out fear. Different interest groups are pushing accreditation in multiple and conflicting directions, as illustrated by the new political selection process for membership on the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity.

Leaders in education need to focus on the management system—the framework in which education takes place. Does the framework include effective collection and analysis of data, as well as effective mechanisms for improving work systems and work processes? Does the management system empower or inhibit faculty and staff from engaging in local improvements?



Until the leaders of our educational systems (elected and appointed) take the time to delve into the body of knowledge of the quality discipline, our educational systems will continue to fall short in delivering what our society needs.

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