

Looking for “Champions Without Borders”: A Role Worth Considering

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Abstract

This paper encourages “champions” (mainly award winners) to focus beyond their individual institutions to a broader audience by organizing themselves internationally. This premise of champions without borders draws on the views espoused and the work accomplished by *Medecins Sans Frontiers*. Like medical doctors, Champions possess a collection of unique and proven expertise that can:

- impact and shape views on teaching and learning of colleagues who solicit such expertise;
- provide input to frame policy debates on national issues on teaching, learning and research;
- ultimately improve student learning *anywhere* so that their opportunities are expanded.

Looking Outside Your Window

Looking beyond one’s department, faculty or institution can be liberating. Regional and national collaborations in teaching and learning are providing synergies of enriched discourse, new curricula, reflection-in-action modules on various topics, research alliances, and a general multiplier effect within communities of practice. Examples of champions leading many of these kinds of Canadian collaborations include regional and national speaking engagements (at the McGraw Hill Conference Series); the development of online modules (at home institutions and the Institute for the Advancement of Teaching in Higher Education); the obtaining of federal funding (grants from HRSDC and CANARIE to teach large classes, to address diversity issues), and so on.

International alliances that look beyond disciplinary subject matter in teaching and learning are also beginning to emerge. For example, the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning advocates legitimizing and strengthening a form of scholarship beyond national borders. Thus, interested individuals are overcoming local constraints and finding their voice in collaborations that are not confined by institutional, regional or national borders.

I am sure there are similar examples of successful efforts of collaboration outside one’s institution in all of the countries participating in this form of International Scholars. Drawing on local, national and international experiences can only strengthen future initiatives.

Looking for Godot

Thinking in an international context does not attempt to undermine the difference champions have made locally. However, at annual meetings of 3M Teaching Fellows and other venues that have addressed quality assurance issues, it has been repeatedly pointed out that the impact of champions has not changed institutional norms. The bar of quality assurance seems to hover around where it has always been.

My colleague Michael Moore has pointed to several institutional stakeholders whose mandate it is to champion quality, but in practice their efforts fall short of expectations. The context is an entrenched institutional culture that resists change. In addition, increasing quality is challenged by a mentality that one need not fix anything until it is visibly broken. All this despite “shocks” from under-funding, early retirements, double cohorts, etc., where the system has proven to be far more resilient than what many have predicted.

Today, there are no ISO equivalent standards for quality assurance that can measure the inputs, the process and the outputs that provide meaningful recommendations for change. Perhaps it is OK to maintain the status quo because the risk/reward payoffs are not compelling enough to make a difference in the quality assurance quotient.

Thus, many of us continue to work within the system and sporadically report signs of positive change. Quality issues are being addressed locally by redefining and practicing new forms of scholarship through technology integration efforts, through professional development efforts that revisit learning, and through projects that deal with specific issues including academic integrity, access, student retention, etc. However, measuring change that can be observed on a given quality assurance meter within institutions remains elusive and the pace of change seems to be localized and diffused. If history provides any clues, it seems that champions and other advocates promoting higher quality assurance must persist and persevere to reinvent internal processes with the onus clearly on the change agent.

Many of us continue to look for and wait for Godot.

Looking for Media

The role of Canadian media to regularly inform the public on issues facing the Academy is one that has not evolved. The national papers only rarely highlight the issues. Magazines (MacLeans for example) tend to report what the newspapers have already reported. Radio and Television? Forget it. Higher education has been given little attention.

The paucity of journalists and media outlets that pay any attention to university education in Canada means that any organization would need to work very hard to get just a bit of coverage. Champions, even in the Nobel category are either ignored or buried in the back pages. A national PR firm recently advised the Executive of the Council of 3M Teaching Fellows that simply being a group with a cause isn't enough to capture the interest of the public. "Not only is there a need for lots of 'output', but they must also be considered newsworthy to the mainstream media -- which means newsworthy in and of themselves (e.g. a boycott, a demonstration, hard-hitting piece of research, major poll etc.), but also in sectors that the media often covers".

Others explain the lack of media attention by citing weak leadership amongst university administrators that typically shy away from issues and the spotlight. This, despite the challenges and opportunities that higher education institutions repeatedly present to parents, students and taxpayers in general.

An international organization that provides "output", to common issues in higher education and in particular to quality assurance may offer valuable leverage that would draw the attention of the media.

Looking Beyond Borders

If you are inclined to agree with any of the views expressed above, consider harnessing championship expertise via an international organization. In a world that is becoming smaller, it is now possible to think globally where the expertise of champions: (a) is or will be welcomed and valued; (b) will have a measurable impact on a given community; (c) occur in relatively short periods of time and (d) will be sustained by a pool of experts from participating countries .

From anecdotal evidence and personal experience, I can report that international assignments related to designing/teaching/consulting and the like in places like Trinidad, Bled, Belgrade, Paris, Leipzig, Beijing and Karachi seemed to have made a qualitative difference in. These experiences exceeded by far any of my comparable efforts at my home institution.

Looking beyond borders has also redefined collegiality and collaboration in terms of achieving fulfillment and reminded me of what had drawn me to the profession in the first place.

Is it possible to pool our talents in a simple (flat?) organizational structure that harnesses our expertise and represents us (in some web repository?) so that we may engage in frequent meetings (via monthly VOIP?) allowing us to articulate a shared vision and formulate policies that can sustain our endeavors? Can looking beyond borders make a difference in quality assurance collectively than we would otherwise accomplish at home?

To bind the efforts of champions, an organizational forum such as this one is necessary to provide a voice for many. At the San Diego meeting one colleague mentioned that we need a kind of “G7 parent organization of movers and shakers” that deals with quality assurance issues. The time may be ripe to move forward.

We are already planning to meet again in the UK since we can readily see the value of champions and educational experts meeting annually to focus on issues determined in advance. It seems obvious that much can be achieved through the creation of a formal network and community of champions.

Looking Beyond Benefactors

How can an organization flourish from one extreme (voluntarism) to another (an endowment that overcomes any financial constraints)? If the most valuable resource is our shared expertise, we might explore stages of how an International organization is able to sustain itself.

Consider for a moment your national awards program that has acknowledged champions to carry out what they individually and collectively believe in. What are the most important factors that explain the program’s success?

The success of the 3M Teaching Fellowship program, for example, is not primarily derived from the recognition and publicity that award winners receive nor from the monetary aspects of the award (in fact no money is received by the recipients). It is rooted in the conversations on teaching and learning between Fellows across disciplines from large and small institutions who come together. Remarkably, this occurs during a three day retreat where award winners simply talk about issues they feel are important to them.

These conversations are the basis of friendships and are often the source of regional and national projects which are later diffused and reinforced locally, at regional and annual conferences like this one and in international settings.

Champions beyond borders can choose to adopt successful attributes of national award programs as well as those aspects from other not-for-profit organizations that effectively project the values of their members.

Looking for Champions Without Borders

Champions without borders could afford the same kind of leverage by bringing together ideas, projects and expertise that can be shared and showcased. Endorsing this lays the foundation to establishing practices that are collegial, credible, and focused. In the first instance, we simply need to meet, get to know what we have done, what we are capable of doing, share ideas and dreams. We also need to get organized and consider representing ourselves in a space for everyone to participate.

Today, reaching students in India, China and Russia (to name a few billion people) may be considered as important as reaching students in our own classrooms. Many of us are poised to continue sharing our expertise with an audience who wants hear from us. We have the technologies that afford communication and sharing at little cost. Quality assurance will perhaps evolve at a faster pace when champions continue to practice the standards that we espouse and practice them *wherever* they are most likely to succeed.

We can learn a lot from *Medecins Sans Frontiers*. It is an organization that continues to make a qualitative difference in the lives of so many.