



QualiTools for IT-Trainers

DEFINING QUALITY PROBLEMS IN IT TRAINING AND SELECTING QUALITY TOOLS FOR IT TRAINERS

INTERVIEW

with **Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner**,
representing the project partner
European Peer Review Association on
the methods covered by QualiTools
their use

I: What are the areas QualiTools will cover in order to improve the quality in training?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner: The areas included in the QualiTools methods database deal with the actual

training situation. They cover the entire teaching and learning process: from the initial planning to the transfer of learning by participants. The whole training cycle is accompanied by methods that help prepare, evaluate and steer the training process.

Beyond managing a specific training situation, the QualiTools methods also encourage trainers to engage in self-reflection - by themselves or together with colleagues - and to take a systematic and comprehensive approach to quality assurance of their trainings.

I: Who will be able to use these methods?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner: The special feature of these methods is that trainers are the "primary target group". The methods are easy-to-use and can be applied by the trainers themselves. While support in using them may be helpful in some cases, trainers overall do not need intensive training or expert support in order to benefit from them. They can pick from a "menu" of different activities, starting with those tools that best suit their purposes. Using the Qualitools methods can (and should!) even be fun.

I: How come that you chose these specific areas?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner:

We chose them because these areas are key to ensuring training quality on the "micro-level", i.e. the focus on what happens in the classroom, laboratory or lecture hall. As I said before they encompass the most important aspects of a training session, aspects which can be influenced and shaped by the trainer her/himself. This requirement is very important: the methods should empower trainers to develop their own practice. This means that the aspects they deal with need to be within the realm of the trainer's "decision-making powers" so to speak. In addition, the methods chosen highlight the importance of collaboration or even "co-creation" between the trainer and the participants in order for a training to be successful.

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I: What is the additional benefit we get from using these methods – isn't it enough if a training organisation gets a QM certificate?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner: Experience has shown that QM focuses on management aspects. QM usually includes some provisions on training quality, of course. But they usually do not impact the individual training. "Evaluations", i.e. questionnaires handed out after the training, more often than not remain rather superficial and generic. They say little about a specific training setting or process - and they often actually come too late, when the training is over. Apart from that they are not rich in information. It is common wisdom in quality assurance that the most important and meaningful parts of a questionnaire are usually the open questions - which unfortunately are not always answered in full.

I: In how far do the QualiTools close this gap?

The QualiTools methods provide rich and timely information. They acknowledge that training is a professional activity and that trainers need to become reflective practitioners in order to provide good and meaningful training. The methods help to investigate the link between training goals, didactical methods and planning, expectations and previous experiences of participants, the teaching and learning process jointly created by trainers and participants and the outcomes in terms of learning and its transfer into "real life".

I: What is the main difference to QM?

They take a bottom-up approach – as opposed to quality management, which, in the end, is rather a top-down affair – and encourage and also demand commitment and personal responsibility of trainers. In short: they are all about self-evaluation on the level of individual trainers or teams of trainers.

I: What areas could be important specifically in IT training?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner:

The project targets IT trainings, so the methods first and foremost will support IT trainers. They tackle specific challenges that are quite widespread in this

area of training: High participant involvement is not as common as in other training areas. Neither are personal interaction, self-evaluation and pedagogical flexibility. At the same time, as our investigation at the beginning of the project has shown, there are a number of challenges in IT training among them the high heterogeneity of participants in terms of knowledge, skills and expectations. This is something that needs to be dealt with. The QualiTools methods are particularly suitable for facing these challenges.

I: Are there areas that are important in all vocational training fields?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner: On the other hand, many training aspects covered by QualiTools are independent of the field of training: Knowing about your participants' needs and expectations, getting feedback on the training process, understanding and enhancing learning outcomes – all of this is relevant for any teacher or trainer. So we expect QualiTools to be applicable in a wide range of training fields and settings. The methods are also easily adaptable, if necessary.

I: Can these methods only be used in adult training or are they also applicable in vocational schools or in initial VET?

Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner: The QualiTools methods follow the adult education paradigm of putting learners first, valuing their experience and enhancing the collaboration between trainers and participants.

Many methods are, of course, equally suitable for schools and initial VET -- provided that teachers are ready to become involved with their learners in an equitable and cooperative way. Some teachers may still reluctant to see students as partners and institutional culture does not change rapidly. This can be an obstacle to using QualiTools. On the other hand, the project QualiTools can also help to support change: It offers a wealth of practical quality assurance tools which, hopefully, may contribute to current trends of self-evaluation also beyond the IT training sector.

Website: www.qualitools.net

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BASIC DATA OF QUALITOOLS



Project partners:

- ✓ University of Social Sciences – Społeczna Akademia Nauk - Marta Kedzia (co-ordinator)
- ✓ ABIF (analysis consulting and interdisciplinary research) – Karin Steiner
- ✓ European Peer Review Association – EPRA – Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner
- ✓ Bridging to the future Ltd (UK) – Duncan Chamberlain, Daniel Zastawny
- ✓ CECOA – Center for Professional Training in Commerce and Trade (Portugal) – Vanda Garcia Vieira & Cristina Dimas
- ✓ Znanie – Radosveta Drakeva, Valentina Georgieva

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SYNTHESIS REPORT ON “Quality Tools and QA Challenges of introducing bottom-up QA practices” in Austria, Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and the UK

When it comes to challenges observed in IT trainings, there are common aspects mentioned by training institutions of several countries. These include:

- **Differing prior knowledge:** Especially in the IT training a differing previous knowledge of the participants is a challenge, in spite of placement tests.
- **Specific questions and response to wishes:** A challenge for any IT trainer is the request to answer very specific questions that may be outside the scope of the training course.
- **Previous learning experiences:** On many occasions there will be individuals enrolled on the training course who have had previous (and bad) learning experiences.
- **Motivation & engagement:** From several perspectives building and keeping the motivation through the courses is one of the most important aspects in training situations.
- **Disagreement within the training:** Research suggests that although trainers need to be aware that they could be wrong, any repeated challenge to their authority undermines the course.
- **Different learning types:** It is likely that in a group setting there will be persons with different learning types and it is a challenge to the trainer to respond to that in order to make sure that every participant will accomplish the learning goals.
- **Heterogeneity of the group:** According to Austrian training institutions a training's target group needs to be defined upfront of a course since age, motivation, intended use, learning capacity and previous knowledge are decisive for how to design the training.

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However, it is also obvious that the perception and identification of problems regarding IT trainings in some aspects is quite different in different countries. In Austria, learning withdrawal was often observed with persons who have not been in a classical studying situation for a long time and who are not used anymore to acquire new knowledge systematically.

[in UK: original training; in Portugal: Qualification of trainers; in Bulgaria: Theory-oriented instead of practice oriented trainings]

QUALITY AREAS

The quality areas to be covered within a training start with the beginning of the training

Getting to know expectations and knowledge of the training participants



Learning motivation can be enhanced if a trainer takes participants' expectations into account. The already acquired knowledge and the skills in the respective training field are important as trainers need to build on already existing knowledge.

Getting interim and final feedback by the participants



Using feedback methods during a training is important so that the trainer can find out about participants' experiences (what have they learned so far, how they experience the process, what they

still need to learn etc.) and perhaps adapt the rest of the training accordingly. At the end of the training, feedback helps to assess what has been achieved and to gather information on how the training could be improved in the future.

Preparation, documentation and reflection of learning processes



Focussing on the participants' learning process is an essential aspect of the success of a training. The planning, the reflection, the documentation of learning processes enhances the quality of a training as it gives feedback to oneself and to the trainer.

Reflection among trainers on training problems and quality



This quality area is the only one focussing on a quality improving activity taking place outside the training itself. Discussing and exchanging training methods and training quality issues is important as trainers quite often work by themselves and are left alone with quality problems in the training.

SELECTION OF QUALITOOLS METHODS

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Knowledge Café

The *Knowledge Café* is a method that can be used at the beginning and at the end of a course. It has the purpose to make the knowledge and skills of a group visible and is very activating. 5-6 participants sit around a table with a large sheet of paper on the table in front of them. The trainer has written a specific topic on each of the sheets he/she wants the participants to discuss on. All participants may write thoughts, questions and already acquired knowledge on the sheets of paper. After app. 10 minutes, the groups change the table and discuss the next issue. One person stays on at the original table to pass on information to the new group. Finally all groups reflect upon the results of the group discussions. The sheets of paper may be photographed and used for the course documentation.



Counselling among colleagues

The method of counselling among colleagues was originally invented by the psychiatrist Michael Balint in order to reflect upon the patient-doctor-relationship. Today it is used among different kinds of professional groups, from social workers to teachers, from counsellors to trainers. As a difference to informal group discussions the method follows a specific structure that is ensured and controlled by a facilitator (from inside or outside the organisation the professional group works for). In addition to the "Balint group", other models for the reflection among colleagues were developed over time. In the QualiTools database and handbook two variations of this method are described in detail.



Foot and voice

An easy method for feedback during and at the end of a course is *Foot and Voice*. The group is asked to stand in a circle and the method is explained: One participant makes a comment on the course and moves towards the middle of the circle. The others may also move (or not): the nearer they move to the centre, the more they agree with the statement. The method provides a quick interim or final feedback.



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NEXT STEPS



The next step is to translate all the selected 65 methods from English into Bulgarian, Portuguese, Polish and German and create a **multilingual methods database for IT trainers**. This database will be accessible via www.qualitools.net free of charge 24/7 in December 2016.