

## THE EDUCATIONAL CHANGE PROCESS AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT : A PERSONAL VIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Needs assessment has become an important issue in the educational change process. Research in needs assessment is, however, lacking. This brief paper tries to examine needs assessment and its relevance to educational change, particularly in academic organizations.

### INTRODUCTION

Change breeds change and the process continues. Change is perhaps the most pervasive and perplexing characteristic of modern culture. The dynamic aspect of modern society demands that individuals and institutions (academic and non-academic) deal effectively with the change if they are to survive and flourish in the current fast evolving era of information technology.

The problems related to educational change, however, are particularly acute for academic organizations serving the general public. These organizations are designed to respond to the needs of the public and these needs are changing so fundamentally and rapidly that new structures and delivery services are constantly in great demand. The existing various educational systems serving the general public are certainly prime examples of organizations experiencing such demands related to change.

Increasingly, the public has expected its educational systems to meet the ever-growing

number of individual and societal needs. These expectations have often exceeded the ability of the educational systems to fulfill them.

Given the need for educational change, institutional administrators must then decide either to develop an appropriate innovation internally or to seek out an innovation developed outside their systems adequate to their needs. This is, then, a major issue of growing concern in the employment of any strategic approach to organizational change used in the diffusion and adoption of educational innovations. This is the issue of "needs assessment".

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The topic of needs assessment has appeared frequently in educational change literature. As far back as 1977 (Paul, 1977:46) educationists were reminded that "recognition of (institutional) needs and congruence of the change program with needs to facilitate change." Needs recognition has generally been highlighted as the first step towards successful academic change and institutional improvement. Most organizational change models include the diagnosis of needs as a basic component in the change process.

In theory, a comprehensive needs assessment, involving parents, students, community and staff, provides optimum results in the identification of needs. One cannot deny that in conducting a discrepancy analysis

(needs assessment) it is crucial to include all partners in attempting to achieve educational success. These partners include, at least, the learners, the parents, community members, and the educators. An effort to determine needs that do not include all the partners in education may run the risk of presenting a seriously biased starting point for educational design. Suffice to say that needs assessment within an institution is a basis for instructional improvement which generally involves updating of existing course structures or teaching manuals to meet current and future needs of society, and making changes to expedite delivery services to meet market demands.

A need is defined as the measurable discrepancy (or gap) between current outcomes (what is) and desired or required outcomes (what should be). This definition of "need" generally underlies most of the needs assessment models currently in use to activate an educational change process. The term "needs assessment" therefore refers to the process for identifying outcome gaps between current results and desired results, placing those "gaps" in priority order, and selecting the gaps of highest order for closure. Hence, there are four general stages in a needs assessment process:

1. determination of desired or required state of affairs,
2. determination of the real or current situation,
3. analysis of the discrepancies between these two states (needs), and
4. a priority ranking of these needs for subsequent action planning for educational change.

A major task for instructional model and process builders is to design activities and

strategies which ensure that the products of each stage are as accurate as possible. In discussing this concern about the ultimate validity and usefulness of various needs assessments, it becomes somewhat obvious that the data collected must represent the actual world of learners and related people, both as it exists now and as it will, could or should exist in the future.

Needs assessment is therefore seen as a tool to aid in planning successful change efforts in educational development. It can help provide change agents a means to lower the risk of designing or proposing solutions for which there are no related problems. This function alone establishes needs assessment as a valued component in the process of educational improvement.

While it is important that the needs assessment product be an accurate picture of current needs, it is equally important that those who participate in the needs assessment effort perceive the products, the identified needs, to be accurate. When felt needs are met, a faster rate of adoption of innovations should occur and that ultimately triggers the educational change process. However, if the change projects are not based on felt needs they often go awry or produce unexpected consequences. A needs assessment, hence, does not exist in a vacuum. It is a part of a larger educational change process. This larger process is best served when needs surfacing in the assessment process are perceived as representing the real situation by a majority of those who comprise the education system to be changed.

It is not only important that the identified needs be perceived as accurate, but it is also equally important that participants feel committed to their solution. This is especially