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FreeQuality: Towards Content-Specific Service

by S. Thomas Foster, Jr., Boise State University

FreeQuality is a student-run, student-developed, non-commercial, content-rich Web site that provides quality-related tools and information available for download to the world community. The Web site is run as a not-for-profit entity and is designed to make hitherto expensive quality-related software, training materials, and information available for download—free of charge.

Justification

I have struggled with two issues in teaching. The first is that many assignments are somewhat artificial in that they generally result in a grade, some learning, and not much beyond that. While there are, for example, competitive student writing competitions available, these sometimes seem unattainable for the average student. With the typical assignment, it is difficult to motivate students to perform beyond what is required for a grade. Utilizing FreeQuality,

I have found that assignments take on a life of their own as students now seek advice and help in developing their assignments so that they can do their best work.

Second, we want students to be able to create a portfolio of work through their courses that they can use to find employment after completing their degree programs. This approach provides students a showcase for their work that can be demonstrated to potential employers.

In addition, FreeQuality provides students an opportunity to manage and develop a not-for-profit entity that provides content over the Internet to an international community. By doing so, they are adding to the body of knowledge in their field of study. This requires not only project work but strategic planning and marketing the results of their work. It also allows students to tailor a specific course to their needs as they can contribute content on a variety of topics to this effort.



S. Tom Foster

is a professor of quality and operations management at Boise State University and has experience in manufacturing, financial services, and international oil exploration. Tom served on the 1997 and 1996 Boards of

Examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. He has published over 40 quality-related articles in journals such as the Decision Sciences, International Journal of Production Research, Journal of Quality Management, International Journal of Quality and Reliability Management, Quality Management Journal, and Quality Progress. His most recent book is Quality Management: An Integrative Approach (Prentice Hall). Tom is founder of www.freequality.org and was awarded the ASBSU 2000 Outstanding Faculty Award. He was the winner of the 2002 DSI Instructional Innovation Award Competition with his presentation on FreeQuality.

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Participants

This approach has been used at the graduate and undergraduate levels at both Boise State University and Pennsylvania State University. It has also included graduate engineering (MS), business students (MBA), and undergraduate students from all of our college of business majors. Pedagogically, students work on assignments as individuals and in teams, depending on the assignment. FreeQuality has been used with about 500 students over the last two years at these two institutions. We have found that the pedagogical approach is very flexible and have used it in a variety of classes including:

- Graduate engineering course in quality management.
- Graduate course in advanced technology and operations topics
- Undergrad intro to quality management
- Undergrad operations management
- Undergrad operations strategy

Educational Objectives

As teachers, our desire is to motivate students to do their best work. We use experiential learning to create a sense of ownership among the students. Using the FreeQuality approach, the instructor becomes a coach and a supervisor of student work. This breaks down many of the walls erected by the traditional professor/student paradigm. Second, FreeQuality provides a means for an instructor to make assignments relevant and "real" to students. For example, writing assignments take on a new sense of importance as students become excited about the FreeQuality mission. In one not-so-unique case that involved developing a set of training slides, rather than completing the suggested 30 slides, a student (one of our majors) developed a comprehensive training seminar on his topic with over 80 PowerPoint slides. Also, we want our students to learn through providing service. This gives students an emotional commitment to doing their best work while providing service to the world community. FreeQuality users can sense this. For example, a Korean user recently sent an e-mail to our class stating the following:

Having received the newest ASTM standards newsletter today, I found

the introduction of your site and visited immediately. How can I say thank you for this most remarkable teamwork and service to mankind? Even if I could use all languages in the world to express my heart's appreciation it would not be enough. May you receive all blessings from Heaven and Earth.

Sincerely,
Gina L. Binetti
Int'l Business Dept. Manager
Seil Hi-Tec Co., Ltd.
Rep. of Korea

FreeQuality is designed as a not-for-profit business. The Web hosting is donated. I donated the URL. The students donate content and their time to service and improve the Web site; they also develop and update a strategic planning document, and implement the strategic plan.

The FreeQuality approach allows for service learning that is *content specific*—students can pursue content studies and provide service by making their findings available to the world practitioner community.

The students develop contacts with experts in quality management in the outside world. The Web site allows for users to subscribe to the Web site. Although, the number is growing all of the time, we currently have over 500 people from over 40 countries who receive monthly updates about the site. It is common for current and former students to receive e-mails from around the world thanking them for their work. Students also have the option to "opt out" of having their projects on the Web site.

Students become familiar with content standards for Web sites as they have developed standards for materials placed on the Web site. The students also learn how to market the Web site through "real-life" activity. As an indicator of their success, whereas the original strategic plan projected 2,000 hits during the first year, we actually received over 75,000 hits and are averaging over 1,000 hits per week in 2002. We get hits from literally every major company in the world. Last semester, our students received help (donated) from a professional Web development firm to redesign and improve the "look and feel" of the site. Again, this effort went "above and beyond" my expectations. So far, the content that we have emphasized includes: quality tools, knowledgebase topics, and training materials. But the content is only limited by our imaginations.

Conclusion

The FreeQuality experience has certainly been rewarding for my students as well as for me. We encourage you to refer students and professional associates to the site. We also encourage others to develop free content sites in their fields of endeavor. A great deal of good could come from creating rigorous content in fields such as medicine, law, engineering, hygiene, safety, statistics, math, and every other field. Perhaps then, the World Wide Web could fulfill its potential for transmitting knowledge and helping the poor. ■

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DSINFO

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