Instructional Quality Control in State Administered Rider Education Programs

MEREDITH G. GIBSON
Specialist, Training and Development
Motorcycle Safety Foundation
United States

ABSTRACT

Instructional quality control is everyone's business. It is a system of activities designed to ensure adequate standards of instruction. These standards are found within the training curriculum guides and within the instructor preparation materials. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation provides quality materials for quality rider training programs based on sound, educational tenets; however, quality control measures are important components of the implementation of the rider training curriculum and the continuous support and mentoring of the instructor.

Multiple factors must be considered in a comprehensive, effective instructional quality control system. These components include: the quality of the curriculum, the role of the instructor and his/her continuous evaluation and mentoring, the value of the review process and the utilization of the review results, and the overall process of program administration and site and equipment maintenance.

The decentralized administration of motorcycle training programs across the nation provides both a strength and a challenge. The strength is in the diversity of programs that help each state meet unique, very individual needs. This decentralization also presents a challenge for state coordinators and site administrators. The challenge is that within the diversity of programs, there must be a firm commitment to quality control. Each person involved in rider training shares in this responsibility for implementing and ensuring quality rider education.

INTRODUCTION

Quality control (QC) in rider education is a subject which prompts much discussion with people implementing rider education programs. A great deal of energy is expended in seeing that the curriculum is taught exactly as it was designed. The small individual site, with only one or two instructors, should be involved in this quality control process, as should the large state and military programs. At the small site level, the process may involve something as simple as having one instructor peer evaluate and peer coach another instructor. The state administered programs and their quality control process are constrained only by the philosophy of agency personnel and budget limitations.

Quality control is quality control is quality control. Quality control is discussed as if there were a universally accepted definition of the concept. In a recent discussion with a state program administrator, he defined his concept of quality control as consisting entirely of a system for gathering and compiling the "grin sheet" course evaluations completed by the participants at the end of the program. The expenditure obviously is quite low for this type of quality control, as is its value. Conversely, in another state, nearly a quarter of a million dollars is spent on quality control. As one might imagine, this system of quality control is intricate and sophisticated, with the value of the resulting data and interpretations quite valuable.

In talking with the motorcycle safety administrator in state "D," it became apparent what quality control was not. In state "D" quality control is predominantly administrative in nature. While we can not argue that getting forms completed and filed properly and payments made on time contribute to the smoothness of an operation, these sorts of activities are not comparable to efforts made to ensure the quality of instruction. Quality control, for the purposes of discussion here, deals with the calibre of instruction, with an understanding, of course, that safety is also a concern. Administrative processes could be the subject of an entirely separate paper regarding the implementation of a quality rider education program.

QUALITY CONTROL: DEFINITION AND CHALLENGE

For the purpose of this paper, the term quality control means an aggregate of activities designed to ensure an adequate standard of instruction. This definition encompasses a system of interrelated activities, the collective results of which become the measure for the quality of the instructional program. Riders must receive high quality instruction to meet the objective of rider education. If program quality is not established and maintained, riders are not trained properly, and the operational goals for rider education are lost. Without compliance to standards, there is no way training objectives can be met. When quality control is not adequate, training is inadequate and riders graduate unprepared. Poorly conducted MRC:RSS programs do not teach course participants how to properly and safely ride a motorcycle. Since these programs provide a completion card or certificate, participants think they are prepared. This false sense of confidence is more "dangerous" for the rider than if he/she were self-taught because, if they were self-taught, they at least question their competence and are generally more cautious. In some cases, quality control is indeed not adequate. The challenge then is to take a look at quality control plans or programs and find ways to have them become stronger.

THE ROLE OF CURRICULUM IN QUALITY CONTROL

The curriculum is the basic element of instructional quality control. The current basic rider training course is the Motorcycle RiderCourse:Riding and Street Skills (MRC:RSS). This curriculum is grounded in research, ranging from formal and feasibility studies to observational data and instructor questionnaires. The conclusions drawn from the Hurt Study, "Motorcycle Accident Cause Factors and Identification of Countermeasures" served as a major piece of formal research that contributed to the current MRC:RSS edition. For example, this curriculum addresses the problems identified in Hurt's study relating to accident-involved motorcyclists. Hurt's major contribution was to identify three problem areas in his conclusions: cornering, braking and swerving. The MRC:RSS curriculum focuses on these three problem areas and provides concept development and practice for the riders in the program. Experience with the curriculum indicates that it is efficient, educationally effective and, with the variety of scheduling flexibility, administratively sound.

THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTORS IN QUALITY CONTROL: TWO MAJOR SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

A second measure of a quality control program is the initial quality of instructors. The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) recommends a system for training instructors which involves approximately 55 instructional hours for approximately seven days. The Chief Instructor Guide (CIG) is the principal resource available to Chief Instructors for conducting the instructor program. The guide is divided into instructional segments called units. The goal of the instructor training program is to produce a group of trained, competent instructors. There is, however, some debate regarding the consistency of quality and level of competency of the instructors who successfully complete the instructor course.

The MSF certifies the instructors who successfully complete a "bare bones" program of training; however, there are two major schools of thought regarding the quality of the programs. Some state programs feel that additional activities before and during the training make for a better prepared instructor. One state (let's call it state "B"), for example, has an extensive interview process, an elaborate pre-course assignment, time off between training days for a mid-course assignment, and study guides throughout the training period. State "C", on the other hand, expends little additional effort and energy during the instructor training, with the emphasis on application of skills after training. The governing philosophy is that instructor candidates should go through a standard no-frills instructor course and then concentrate on activities which provide opportunities for application and practice time, thus producing a better instructor. The basic question is: should major resources be spent to ensure that the instructor be of the highest quality possible when they exit the instructor training, or should the instructor meet minimal standards during the training program and then extend the skill level through application training?

With this model, the greater expenditure of resources will occur after the instructor completes the formal training. The reasoning behind this practice and application philosophy has to do with what is termed "instructor drift." The premise is that, regardless of how extensively a person is trained within the format of Instructor Preparation, a subsequent loss of skill and instructor effectiveness must be expected because instructors are primarily employed as dental hygienists, construction contractors,

computer programmers, etc. Their primary focus is on these career pursuits and not on teaching motorcycle courses on a part time basis. These instructors then should constantly be evaluated, refreshed, coached, and updated to give them a chance to refine and practice their skills to maintain quality instruction. Extensive activities to address "instructor drift" phenomenon must be a major focus in quality control. If one had to choose between a focus on instructor preparation or a focus on keeping instructors on-line after the training is over, the latter is more educationally sound. Dealing with normal "instructor drift" is the area where many quality control systems break down.

Once instructor candidates have successfully completed the basic training or "boot camp" of Instructor Preparation, they are certified as ready to become good instructors. In reality, they have completed a general exposure to the curriculum and instructional strategies (MRC:RSS). The goal of the instructor course is to prepare selected individuals to teach the MRC:RSS and, upon successful completion, most graduates can do this. Some function with minimal competence while others stand out at exemplary levels of competency. All of the graduates are rookies, however, and display all the uncertainties characteristic of novice teachers. In state "B," these rookie instructors are scheduled to teach immediately and are periodically evaluated by peer instructors (better than average instructors selected by the program administrator). The program administrator also initiates a probationary period for in-coming instructors as well as establishes mentors to work with fledgling instructors. Additionally, the program administrator and program specialist "periodically" evaluate sites. There is no established time-line as to how often this evaluation occurs.

In state "C," rookie instructors begin their careers by working with Site Coordinating Instructors (SCI's). In this program, state "C" species the expected outcome for the time period. Other training outcomes are defined by the SCI. Generally, the rookie observes, works as an assistant, and works as a lead instructor under the watchful eye of the SCI. This coaching continues until the SCI is satisfied that the instructor can demonstrate that he/she can function within specified instructional standards. In state "C," instruction is expected to occur at 80% or more of the 100% standard.

In state "A", rookie instructors start teaching immediately after instructor training and can work as either the lead or the assistant instructor from the very beginning. The interim mentoring step provided by a seasoned instructor is absent. Recently, a program specialist expressed his frustration when he observed a rookie instructor who had successfully completed the instructor training course only two months previously. The instructor "butchered" the course. Further conversation revealed that this was the instructor's first teaching experience since he had completed instructor training. It should come as no surprise that the level of instructor performance was low. This experience illustrates the need for rookie instructors to have opportunities to teach with more experienced instructors. Even when the new instructor teaches in the lead role, a designate could be available to evaluate and assist should the need arise.

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM REVIEW IN QUALITY CONTROL

The third element in quality control is a reliable and consistent system of program review. Several sub-elements drive this system, one of which deals with "who" conducts the review. In all states surveyed, the reviews are conducted by the administrator and/or a designee who, in most cases, is a Chief Instructor (CI). It is extremely important to have consistency among the reviewers. Nothing

destroys credibility among program personnel more than inconsistency in program review advice.

The reviewers must have some initial training in review criteria and standards and should meet often to review and maintain consistency in these criteria.

UTILIZATION OF REVIEW RESULTS: TWO EXAMPLES

Another important factor in the review process concerns how the review results are utilized. Without exception, the state administrators recently surveyed use the review results as an opportunity to technically assist a site to improve. The review process should primarily be focused toward improved instruction. If the reviewed site fails to meet state course requirements and standards, there should be consequences such as closing the site, changing administrators, removing contracts, etc. Without consequences and opportunities for growth and improvement, the resources devoted to the review process are wasted.

For example, all of the states recently surveyed have some contingency plans in place for a site not in compliance with state instructional requirements. The contingencies range from requiring the site to cease operations to having the site representative meet with the administrator to develop an improvement plan of action. State "C" has an extensive cadre of site coordinating Instructors (SCI) set-up to help with site problems and improvement. The primary function of the SCI is to ensure that all instructors associated with a particular site teach the curriculum the same way, <u>even if it is incorrect</u>. This enables the state to evaluate sites rather than instructors who just happen to be teaching that day. Then, when a component of the program needs to be improved, the SCI executes the change with <u>all</u> instructors at that site. The SCI facilitates the required improvement by meeting with his/her group of instructors, by writing bulletins, by checking to see if the improvements have been made, and by a variety of other remediation techniques. This is probably much more effective and efficient than constantly trying to remediate individual instructors. If the observed instruction falls below a certain level, the SCI is required to audit an Instructor Preparation up to the student teaching unit. Another alternative is to require the SCI and all site instructors to attend a special refresher course. For convenience, this course is set up at the home site and a state program designee teaches the special one-weekend refresher. Other contingencies designed to address specific needs are also available. All of the options involve the SCI. The SCI is one of the most vital pieces in the state system.

In state "C", the SCI (or designee) is required to be present at the Technical Assistance Review. At the end of the visit, the state recognized CI, hired to conduct the review, debriefs the SCI and the instructors involved. This review generates three reports. One is an oral report from the CI to the state program manager. During this conversation, the manager decides what further corrective action, if any, is to take place. The second report is the official written report from the CI to the manager. The third report is from the CI back to the SCI. This is a set of specific notes regarding what was observed. This process gives the SCI a document that he/she can use to institute an improvement plan addressing the discrepancies found in the instructional and safety aspects of the program. The state manager analyzes the written report from the CI. He/she then attaches a cover letter and sends a copy of the report to the head of the state program within the governmental agency responsible for carrying out the legislated operation. The cover letter and copy of the official report also goes to the

site operator. This example serves to illustrate the extent to which one state program is committed to the review component of its quality control system.

THE ROLE OF POLICY AND PROCEDURES MATERIAL IN QUALITY CONTROL

Another quality control tool is an official policy and procedures manual. This written document outlines the instructional aspects of a program and contains everything one could possibly want or need to know about the rider training process. These policies and procedures documents usually contain a section devoted to the specifics of how courses must be taught in a particular state. This section is written for site level contacts and instructors and serves as a primary curriculum and instruction resource. Some states simply refer the SCI and instructors to this particular section of the policies and procedures manual, while others produce an instructional abstract as a separate handbook for coordinators and instructors.

THE ROLE OF FACILITY AND EQUIPMENT MAINTENANCE IN QUALITY CONTROL

Another part of quality control, involves the characteristics of the facilities, quality of equipment used for training and layout of the range. The quality of the facilities and of the equipment used impacts the overall quality of a program. The condition of the motorcycles, for example, reflects on everyone associated with the site operation. Assuring that the bikes are in good condition is clearly a responsibility which must be specifically defined as part of quality control and assigned to a particular person in the program. Otherwise, no one feels that motorcycle maintenance is his/her responsibility. In one state, that responsibility lies with the site operators who are entrepreneurs that accept bike maintenance as part of the cost of doing business. In another state, a full-time employee is retained by the state agency to handle motorcycle maintenance and repair statewide. Range dimensions and how ranges are laid out influence both instruction and safety. Guidelines and specifications for range layout are available from MSF, even if the range is smaller than full size. The ranges at each site should be inspected and results recorded by the agency responsible for implementing the program. To do otherwise is an open invitation to problems, especially in the potential liability area. Courses conducted on ranges where either the instructional or safety standards are not met are of questionable quality.

RESEARCH

Research for this paper involved informal survey contact with several of the administrators from state funded motorcycle safety programs and this writer's extensive experience in working with state programs across the country. Most of the administrators surveyed explained their system of quality control in great detail. Only one indicated that, up to this point, not much quality control had occurred in that particular state. The administrator pointed to lack of personnel and budget as reasons for this lack of quality review and control. This state, however, was an exception. Most of the administrators contacted at least pointed to some activities which they had in place to control quality, and all subscribed to its importance. To profess otherwise would have been equal to denouncing motherhood, apple pie and all the other pillars of our society.

QUALITY CONTROL: EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY

Establishing and maintaining quality is a current trend that even the manufacturing sector in this country subscribes to. Manufacturers are moving away from the once popular "bigger-is-better" and "biggest-is-best" tenet and industry is rejecting the past practice of mass production of low quality "widgets." There is a wave of quality control in the production arena and this concern for quality must carry over into rider education programming. Even though most state personnel speak of their quality control systems, in some cases a fairly wide disparity exists between what is voiced and what is actually occurring. Those responsible for rider education implementation need to look long, hard and objectively at how quality control systems are set up in their programs. They must compare the theory to what is actually occurring and analyse the impact of the gap that exists between what is and what should be. This is in no way an indictment of the quality control systems in place in programs. It is simply a plea to take inventory. Inspect what is happening and ask the hard questions.

The erector set design of state motorcycle safety programs can tempt personnel to allow administrative expediency and budgetary expenditures to cut corners which, in reality, compromises quality control in rider education. Although states do not share the same size budget , they do share the obligation to conduct quality MRC:RSS programs. Smaller state programs must be more creative than large programs in dealing with the elements of a quality control system, but their relative budget size is in no way an acceptable reason for not having a quality control system in place. Taking responsibility to be certain that riders are properly prepared for riding on the street contributes to rider career longevity. Everyone in rider education must shoulder a share of the responsibility for ensuring quality in rider education programs.