Evaluating Quality in the Online Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of measuring the effectiveness of online learning in higher education began at least a half-decade ago when Web-based distance education started expanding at an exponential rate. Traditional quality measures associated with accreditation did not match the new climate of Internet-based teaching and learning (Parker, 2004). Multiple national and global pressures demanded that colleges and universities address issues of quality specifically related to distance Web-based courses and programs. Not the least of expectant stakeholders were state regulators and accrediting bodies. How could a teaching process so dissimilar to centuries of place-based, traditional classroom methods possibly embody quality education?

In an attempt to address these questions, institutions and virtual consortia began developing quality evaluation instruments, best practice models, and guidelines for assessing quality in the online course. By applying a common set of criteria to courses under development, institutions could, if they chose, evaluate which courses were worthy of being added to their growing complement of Web-based offerings.

These recently developed quality models have proven to be one means for assessing the quality of an online course. Often dubbed "front-end" quality tools, these frameworks help evaluators assess how well a course is likely to be taught. By benchmarking elements of a course (i.e., course design, usability and accessibility features, pedagogical practices), reviewers can assess the potentiality of an online course to produce superior results. However, they offer little assistance in actually measuring student learning outcomes. To do that, "back-end" quality assessments are summoned to determine what benefits have accrued to learners of online courses. Because back-end studies require more intensive data-gathering methodologies, it is not difficult to understand why institutions remain uneven in assessing learning outcomes—at least much beyond assessing student and faculty satisfaction and retention rates.

Within the body of literature, there are numerous pleas to change the way we evaluate online learning from a dependence on process measures to a greater deployment of outcome assessments.

Contrast these bids with the actions of early adopters who are unlikely to wait for the rendering of full-bodied outcome studies before forging ahead into the next wave of instructional technologies. Often the creators of best practices themselves, they need little convincing of the worthiness of these forms of education to create effective student-centered learning environments.

Of these two quality assessment methods (evaluating processes vs outcomes), which goes the distance in answering some of the critical questions posed by those interested in the results of online learning effectiveness? Which has the ability to substantiate whether or not online learning is at least as effective as face-to-face learning?

This article takes a "both-and" approach, arguing that each methodology has its place in e-learning quality assessment. Understanding the competing needs of different stakeholders in quality education will shed light on the enormous struggle educators have had in coming to agreement not only in defining quality, but in deciding how to measure it.

THE BIRTH OF QUALITY MODELS

Educational delivery options have been growing steadily since the inception of the Internet in the 1990s. No longer tied to physical structures, public, private, and for-profit colleges are providing educational opportunities to "anywhere learners." Eduventures reported over 350,000 students enrolled in fully online distance learning programs in 2001-2002, with growth rates anticipated of more than 40% annually (Newman, 2003). The increasing statistics may do little more than widen the divide between cyberspace learning enthusiasts and place-based diehards. The latter may never be convinced that the Internet can be an adequate substitute for the classroom as an effective means of learning.

E-learning proponents and skeptics alike have had great interest in determining whether online learning could hold up to face-to-face settings. Research exists to indicate that online learning is "the same as or sometimes even better than traditional classroom learning." The most cited source is Tom Russell's book, *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* (as cited by Milne, 2001). A compilation of 70 years of research, Russell cites reports, summaries, and papers in which *no significant difference* was found in the use of technology in distance education.

While the *No Significant Difference Phenomenon* was welcome news for e-learning advocates, institutions sustained a pressing need to develop and apply consistent quality criteria to evaluate their mushrooming numbers of online courses and programs offered. Needed to satisfy academic deans, presidents, granting agencies, and students of the potential quality this learning format could achieve, quality process benchmarks were being requested by accrediting bodies as well.

Some of the first examples of quality frameworks for the evaluation of an online course included "Standards for Quality Online Courses" developed by the Michigan Virtual University (n.d.); "Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs" (Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, n.d.), adopted by the Texas Higher Education Coordination Board and University of Texas (UT) Telecampus; Sloan-C's "Quality Framework Learning Effectiveness" (The Sloan Consortium, 2003); and WebCT's "Exemplary Course Project" rubric (WebCT, 2003).

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," first published in the AAHE Bulletin in 1987, found enormous popularity a decade later among online practitioners as a powerful lens for developing quality online courses.

BEST PRACTICE ELEMENTS

Similar practice elements in the myriad quality frameworks reveal the presence of a presumed correlation between learning effectiveness and the creation of a student-centered constructivist learning environment. This is significant in that most of the earlier versions did not address pedagogical practices. Later entrants routinely brought them into the equation. Presently, few to none attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the course content itself. Rather, criteria are used to address issues of accessibility, learning styles, student engagement and collaboration, course design, layout, appearance, and technologies used.

For example, in its "Criteria and Standards Used in Evaluating Web-Based Instruction and Delivery Guidelines," the Electronic Learning Institute developed six broad criteria that encompass 96 quality process standards used in evaluating online instruction and delivery (Electronic Learning Institute, n.d.):

1. Flexibility of learner interaction and communication with faculty, peers, and course materials
2. Attention to detail in the course and its materials
3. Attention to detail in the Web design
4. Detailed faculty communication to learners
5. Clear timelines and due dates
6. Creating a sense of collaborative teamwork and "groupness"

Similarly, Griffith University in Australia has a list of 11 broad criteria for quality in online courses (Griffith Institute for Higher Learning, n.d.):

1. The presentation of a clear statement of a subject's intended learning outcomes
2. The provision of carefully structured and laid out learning material
3. The level and range of self-assessment activities and questions
4. The opportunities to provide supportive and constructive feedback
5. Ensuring that new points of information are clearly introduced and contextualized to the subject's intended learning outcomes
6. The manner in which students are engaged
7. Consideration of the relevance and purpose of the sources of information used within the subject
8. The sufficient use of images, graphics, charts in a manner that clarifies learning
9. The appropriateness of the relationship between "learning and a subject's 'assessment'"
10. The presentation of learning material within manageable "chunks" or modules to accommodate a learner's time pressures
11. Whether the subject is enjoyable for the learner and the teacher

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