Questions for the Student Evaluation of Distance Courses

Martha Henckell
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

Michelle Kilburn
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

David Starrett
Southeast Missouri State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Different aspects of education have been evaluated by the government since 1897 (Patton, 1997). Educators have also adopted this means to collect information in order to make better decisions. The complexity of data collection makes this task much more difficult than it may appear. One of the biggest problems associated with evaluations has to do with questions; answers are only as good as the questions asked (Tricker, et al., 2001). Unfortunately, traditional student evaluations, with their focus strictly on traditional course features, are often the instrument used to evaluate distance courses (Achtemeier, et al., 2003). Course improvement and the quality of higher education distance programs can be affected by the use of an evaluation tool that does not fit the diverse setting of a distance learning environment (Griffin, et al., 2003). Differences in traditional and distance education approaches will be identified and used to develop topics for student evaluation questions in the following sections.

BACKGROUND

The key differences between traditional and distance courses can be summed up into one word—management. The term management encompasses four sections: planning, organizing, leading/motivating, and controlling/monitoring (Schermerhorn, 2008). Using this lens, a finite view of the differences will become apparent.

Planning. When developing a distance course, teachers incorporate pedagogical methods that will address or compensate for the environmental differences imposed by the teacher/student and student/student separation. Methods of teaching change; teachers must use techniques of imparting information that differ from the practice of lecturing. Without lectures, instructors of distance courses must find quality methods to convey equivalent information. The same holds true when planning course materials, which are considered one of the prevailing aspects of distance learning (Tricker, et al., 2001). Not being present to demonstrate how each segment in the course content ties together is an additional challenge for distance educators.

Interactions between the teacher and students have been proven to influence the quality of student experiences and learning outcomes in distance courses (IHEP, 2000, as cited by Zhao, et al., 2005). As with maintaining relationships at a distance with friends or relatives, special effort must be directed towards ensuring these exchanges do occur in the classroom. It is through these interactions that a community of learners, with its own unique culture, can be established. In the traditional classroom, there is slightly more leeway as to what learning model can be used. Distance learning communities are, by nature, locked into the constructivist/student-centered approach (Easton, 2003, Knowlton, 2000, Marshall, 2000, Regalbuto, 1999), where interactions and collaboration among the members not only enriches the learning process, but leads to its success (Miller & King, 2003). Collaborative learning is not the only method recognized in the constructivist philosophy; activity-based learning is another teaching method found in this approach. Activities and exercises incorporated into the distance course can cause a greater impact on the success or failure of the distance student. The authors believe that the development and use of activities and exercises must effectively replace or compensate what is missing in distance courses. It

is important to base these choices on the knowledge of what makes distance education successful in light of the separation factors.

Technology is used in distance courses for supporting course requirements (Miller & King, 2003), thereby aiding in accomplishing the same benefits received in a face-to-face environment. While instructors are more frequently incorporating the use of technology in their traditional classrooms, two main technology-related challenges remain: introduction of new technology and how to effectively use technology to achieve learning goals (Robson, 2000). Since technology is entrenched in distance education, more so than in traditional classrooms, it remains a viable difference.

Organizing. As with any course, the components must work well together to provide a natural and meaningful flow. Whereas the teacher is present to guide this process in the traditional classroom, the instructional design aspect holds more responsibility in the distance course. In essence, a system must be established that will coordinate students, activities, and interactions with other supporting units (i.e., learning enrichment center, bookstore, etc). The instructional design of the course must rely on distance learning theory-based practices. Focus must be placed on the development of an arrangement of the course content and media that aids in the most effective transfer of knowledge for students learning at a distance.

Face-to-face communication has its challenges, but communicating and coordinating communication at a distance is even more difficult. Tools that involve technology, such as email, chats, blogs, wikis, and bulletin boards must be utilized properly to be effective. Good communication is necessary in distance courses for a variety of reasons: building of a community and culture, collaborating, reducing feelings of isolation, providing a means of prompt feedback, and most importantly, providing an avenue for students to learn from each other.

Leading/Motivating. Once the planning and organization of a distance course has occurred and the course begins, the instructor takes on another role. In the leading phase, the instructor must provoke enthusiasm and instigate efforts to attain learning objectives as an endeavor to maintain and sustain student motivation (Rovai, et al., 2007). Being physically separated from the students increases the difficulty in recognizing when student enthusiasm and motivation has fallen off.

In the distance education environment, the constructivist theory of learning where learning occurs through activity (Martens, Bastianens, & Kirschner, 2007), has proven to work well (Macdonald, 2004). Distance learners share the characteristics of operating with a higher level of intrinsic motivation and Rovai, et al. recommended structuring distance courses, promoting interpersonal behavior, and providing positive feedback to address this type of motivation.

Controlling/Monitoring. Under the premise that distance education requires students to be self-directed learners, instructors blend more into the background, functioning more as a facilitator of the learning experience (Phillips, 2005). Still existing is the need for monitoring student progress, how well students are at self-directing their learning (Garrison, 1997), and communications (amount, method, and quality). Instructors may need to step in and steer students by placing discussions back on track or encouraging new ideas or ways of thinking (Paloff & Pratt, as cited by Easton, 2003) to ensure the desired results.

CAPTURING VALID STUDENT FEEDBACK

Focusing on characteristics associated with the effective teaching of distance courses, distance education course evaluations should include questions that cover four main areas: (1) course content (Benigno & Trentin, 2000), (2) instructor-related activities (Benigno & Trentin, 2000), (3) campus resources and support (Benigno & Trentin, 2000), and (d) be student-focused (Achtemeier, et al., 2003).

Course Content. In this section, answers are sought to questions regarding organization, course instructions, instructional materials, course activities and exercises, design skills, and technology.

Possible Questions/Topics:

1. Organization of course appeared to be effective for online delivery (Henckell, 2007).
2. Format and page design of web content was easy to navigate (Achtemeier, et al., 2003).
3. Course guidelines and goals were initially provided (Achtemeier, et al., 2003).
4. A road map for learning was provided: what will be learned, how learning will be assessed, and how to learn (Henckell, 2007).