



Chapter X

Quality Assurance of Online Courses

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THE CONCERN ABOUT QUALITY ASSURANCE

The Potential to Compromise Quality

Today, many university programs are integrating online classes into their curriculums. According to Stephen Ehrmann, reasons for online course offerings typically fall into two categories.

One type wanted to use distance learning technology to increase enrollments, often by reaching out to certain types of people who would not otherwise get an education. Some reviewers charge that these proposals were cheating students of most of the support needed for excellence: laboratories, rich libraries, interactive seminars, and informal interaction on campus.

The other type of proposal used computer technology to change what students learned or how they learned. Some reviewers accused such proposals of being tiny bastions of expensive exclusivity, hoarding rich resources for the lucky or the strong, excluding the vast majority of learners who were most in need of excellent teaching.

In other words, most technology proposals were designed either to enlarge the number of learners or to improve what some learners could learn, but not both. (Ehrmann, 1999)

Both objectives, improving access and improving quality, offer incentive for creation of online classes and degree programs. The benefits of using the economical Internet for distance learning are just beginning to be explored and documented. It is almost assured that, as more classes are offered online and become interchangeable at different universities, the proliferation of use by students will increase because of the “anywhere, anytime nature” of the Internet.

Based upon the author’s experience, the convenience of Internet delivery and anytime online class availability are often the primary reasons students enroll in online courses. The quality of the online educational experience is often a secondary consideration to the student. Many times these students are willing to miss the in-class experience and interaction in order to receive credit for online coverage of certain required subject matter. Because of this attitude, there is also the potential for students and potential employers to perceive an online class or degree program as an “alternative” or the “next best thing” to attending traditional lecture classes. This attitude needs to be minimized if students are to utilize online and traditional classes equivalently in their degrees. The same level of quality for the class experience and content should be expected if online and traditional lecture classes are to be considered equivalent. Making an online class as engaging as a lecture class using the Internet is a worthy goal. “Jumping in with both feet is not for timid souls. Internet offerings require large amounts of time in the preparation of course materials. Everything must be viewed in a global sense for an entire semester at the offset.” (Kubala, 1998).

Assuring that the quality of the online class experience is equivalent to the traditional lecture class experience, using a medium that embodies working independently at one’s own pace, and communicating anonymously is a challenge. In fact, at this current stage of development, it is unproven as to whether this objective can be achieved. Class administrators and students must ask themselves, “Is there a trade-off of class quality for the convenience of the delivery method?” Motivations for offering and taking online classes should be fully explored. Class quality should not be compromised for the sake of posting a class online for business reasons, because others are doing it or for the convenience using the Internet brings. Motivations for offering online classes should be based in both improving access and quality. Achieving this level of quality will greatly influence online class acceptability across curriculums and universities, hopefully resulting in better use of classes and Instructor expertise.

At this stage of online education development, there is great potential for the traditional university experience to be reshaped using the Internet.

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