Chapter 5

Quality Matters as the Gold Standard for Accessibility, Diversity, and Inclusion in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021 served as a wake-up call to educators across the globe that the issues of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion were not satisfied in the pre-pandemic online course environment. This chapter will offer the Quality Matters (QM) process as the gold standard in online course assessment, as it is grounded in four theoretical education frameworks and on the principles of Cognitive Load theory. In addition, QM is a premier assessment tool through its use of eight rubric-based standards modeled on Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts. The author will share her experience and lessons learned after participating in a QM audit for an online marketing course. Finally, the author strongly recommends adoption of the QM process as a viable solution to student demand for quality course design that fosters accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Post-Covid reflections on student learning outcomes during the pandemic have led to the institutional acknowledgment that academia can no longer avoid the critical need for platforms with validated standards that support accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in online learning. Prior to Covid, academia was lulled into complacency by its reliance on existing online course offerings, even though in some cases, these courses were designed using standards that were not grounded in sound theoretical frameworks. Thanks to the pandemic, the instructional deficiencies inherent in an online environment have been brought to light. Administrators, instructors, and students faced an overwhelming challenge to maintain the status quo of educational standards with an overnight shutdown of onsite learning. Suddenly, it became crys-

tal clear that online learning could not mirror onsite course lesson planning and successfully support learning outcomes. The shutdown magnified issues of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion because students with these needs pre-pandemic selected onsite courses for extra support. It was now obvious that online course structures did not support the pandemic learning environment. Faculty were thrust into joining the synchronous instructional methodology, many of whom had little or no experience. They also quickly recognized synchronous learning, although part of the online learning course design, as a totally different process from asynchronous and blended/hybrid methods. Presently, the academic community agrees that post-pandemic, as educational access has returned to onsite learning with an increased demand for online access, we can no longer expect to rely on pre-pandemic instructional methods for online learning. Additionally, prior to the shutdown, the need for accessibility, diversity, and inclusion was on administrators' agenda as part of the conversation for change. However, post-pandemic, with an increasing demand for online education as a viable choice for degree completion, there is a recognized need to ensure that students are afforded an inclusive and accessible online education that the faculty has the knowledge and expertise to provide. Best practice in online education posits that quality is determined in assessment practices that are grounded in sound, viable theoretical frameworks as demonstrated by Quality Matters (QM).

This chapter has four objectives:

- To explain the definition of online learning and the concomitant barriers to effective mastery of learning outcomes.
- Introduce QM and explain how the theories that underpin the QM process correlate to best practices in online learning especially accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.
- To showcase the author's personal experience of a QM audit with feedback that supports best practices.
- To evidence research findings and results from this author's QM audit experience that validate QM as a viable assessment process to support quality improvement and excellence in online learning.

BACKGROUND

In 2017, Allen and Seaman identified that 29.7% of students enrolled in tertiary education were participating in some form of online learning (Watson et al., 2017). Post pandemic, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports a dramatic increase in student enrollment in online courses. According to the report, 75% of college students now prefer some form of online access (U.S. Government Accountability Office, n.d.). As a result of the shutdown, pre pandemic skeptical higher education students now recognize the value and availability of online access and have embraced online learning. To meet this demand colleges and universities are offering online learning using different formats consisting of hybrid, blended, distance learning, synchronous, asynchronous, and fully online. Pre-pandemic issues of accessibility, diversity, and inclusion in higher education were problematic but heightened after the classroom transitioned to a totally online learning environment. Post pandemic, a critical lesson learned was that online learning must have meaningful objectives achieved through the development of tailored assignments and assessments and cannot mirror an onsite course design (Chand & Gabryszewska, 2021).

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