Chapter 12
Assessing Adult Learning in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on assessment and evaluation of adult learning, and provides examples of strategies and techniques in online environments. Adult education assessment practices using learning management systems are detailed. Emerging assessment practices tend to take advantage of technology's interactive potential, which reinforces andragogical principles.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Instructional design has always focused on enhancing learning and making teaching more efficient and effective. Only recently have educators not been satisfied with the "e" already embedded in learning but felt compelled to attach it as a prefix to the existing term learning. Has learning changed? At the very least, elearning has to acknowledge the separate role and skill associated with technology. The environment in which students learn also differs, impacting educational interaction.

A vital part of instructional design and program development is assessment. Locating or developing a valid and reliable assessment instrument (or set of tools) requires answering a number of questions: what is assessed, who is assessed, who does the assessing, when and how frequently is the assessment done, how is it done, how are the data analyzed, who analyzes the data, how are the findings acted upon, who acts upon them, what accountability is present? How, then does evaluation change in online learning, and how does technology impact that assessment?

12.2 BACKGROUND OVERVIEW OF ASSESSMENT

Boulmetis and Dutwin (2000) defined evaluation as a "systematic process of collecting and analyzing data in order to determine whether and to what

degree objectives have been or are being achieved" (p. 4). The focus is student performance. Education assessment has a larger agenda: analyzing and using data to make informed decisions about teaching and learning. Assessing adult education programs and their support mechanisms takes time and effort: from deciding what to assess through choosing an appropriate instrument, gathering the data, and analyzing the results. Any slip along the way can lessen its effect and benefits, so the process needs to be planned and implemented carefully.

To this end, the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum (2003) identified nine principles to guide assessment of student learning, which apply well to assessing adult education in general and to online environments in particular:

- Use educational values as your touchstone. Measure what you value.
- Assess adult learning as a complex set of skills, knowledge, and dispositions gained over time. As such, use a variety of assessment methods from different points of view and time.
- Have clear, specific educational goals. Assessment should lead to improvement, so all stakeholders should agree on precisely what needs to be examined—and why.
- Consider both processes and products. How an adult learner solves a problem reflects both internal mental schemas as well as instructional approaches and content, for instance. In online environments, assessment needs to address technical expertise.
- Assess on an ongoing basis. Baselines, benchmarks, and culminating experiences need to be assessed so timely interventions can be incorporated to optimize learning. There should be a spirit of continuous improvement.
- Foster broad involvement. Each stakeholder brings a unique perspective that can

impact others' efforts. Active participation by the entire learning community also optimizes communication and systematic coordination.
- Focus on the use of assessment. Do not assess just for the sake of the process but in order to take justified action on issues that people truly care about.
- Consider assessment as an integral part of the larger picture to improve the learning community and organization. Assessment should not be a separate entity or sidebar entity, but a main ingredient for decision-making.
- Consider assessment as an accountability issue. Educational institutions are accountable to their students and to the community at large. Assessment keeps education "honest" in the eyes of the public.

12.2.1 Defining the Process

Several terms are used in the assessment world, which should be defined so all parties have a common understanding, regardless of the learning environment:

- *Standard:* a statement indicating what students should know and do; curriculum standards state what should occur in the learning environment.
- *Outcome:* the desired and measurable goal, specifying what schools want students to accomplish.
- *Descriptor:* concrete description of an outcome (e.g., uses technology responsibly, legally, and ethically).
- *Indicator:* specific criteria that demonstrate that one has met a standard or satisfied an outcome (e.g., recommends appropriate physical therapy interventions).
- *Rubric*: a scoring guide with differentiated rating descriptions. Usually rubrics entail a number of indicators or criteria.

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