

Chapter 13

A Framework to Assess Appropriate Interaction to Meet Accreditation Quality Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

Appropriate interaction is one criterion of quality of online courses. The importance of interaction in online education is well documented in research findings; explained in various theoretical approaches and models; and highlighted in best practices from consortia, accrediting agencies, and by practitioners. Despite the availability of guides for quality assessment of online courses, a concern arises when program administrators are faced with the questions: What does appropriate interaction in an online course mean and how does one show evidence of it? How does one guide the implementation of appropriate interaction in order to meet recommended quality guidelines or accreditation standards? To partially answer these questions, this chapter proposes a framework to guide the assessment of appropriate interaction as a criterion of quality online course based on accreditation quality guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Accreditation is the means by which American higher education institutions are reviewed for quality (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015). Because of the increased focus on quality and accountability, an institution should consider recommended accreditation standards when developing distance education programs and policies (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015). Accrediting organizations typically provide descriptive guidelines but seldom prescribe how an institution is to assess quality. Specifically, appropriate interaction is usually found among indicators for quality online courses. These criteria are derived from the importance of interaction in online education explained in various theoretical approaches and models (e.g., Anderson, 2003a, 2003b; Hirumi, 2013; Moore, 1989; Moore, 2013); and highlighted in best practices issued by consortia, accrediting agencies, and practitioners (Institute of Higher Education Policy, 2000; Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1997, 2001).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0877-9.ch013

A program administrator responsible for maintaining quality can use several tools and techniques to assess and provide evidence to support the quality of the institution's online programs and courses. Despite the availability of the tools to guide for quality assessment in online courses, a concern arises when program administrators are faced with these questions: What does appropriate interaction in an online course mean and how can one show evidence of it? How to guide the implementation of appropriate interaction that meets the recommended quality criteria?

This chapter proposes a framework to assess appropriate interaction in an online course and is based on the principles of instructional design and accreditation criteria. Appropriate interaction is purposeful and promotes learning; therefore, planned instructional interactive activities must be embedded in teaching-learning strategies that follow the instructional design. Appropriate interaction is also framed by established institutional guidelines, policies, and standards for accreditation purposes. It is not argued that interactions that occur outside the formal planning are not needed or desirable for learning. However, these unplanned types of interactions, or learning activities, were not considered as part of the proposed framework for this chapter. It is expected that the framework can also be useful to guide the design and implementation of appropriate interaction.

BACKGROUND

Accrediting organizations recognize the importance of interaction in their recommended standards and best-practices guidelines for quality online programs (e.g., Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology [ACCSCCT], 2004; Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools [ACICS], 2015; Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions [C-RAC], 2011). Criteria related to interaction mostly give emphasis on the need for appropriate opportunities for interaction among students, between teacher and students, and between student-content. Hence, balanced interactive activities of the three types of interaction are often expected in effective online courses.

Understanding the nature of interaction, and how to facilitate it, is important for effective teaching and learning at a distance (Anderson, 2003a, 2003b; Battalio, 2007; Moore & Kearley, 2012; Simonson et al., 2015). Interaction is perhaps one of the most studied topics in the field of distance education (Anderson, 2003a, 2003b; Bernard et al., 2009; Simonson, et al. 2015). Several theories, practical guidelines, and standards highlight the value of interaction in online courses (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Roblyer & Wiencke, 2003, 2004; Sorensen & Baylen, 2000). Although similar in the core (e.g., communication among participants in the learning experience), the definitions and classifications of interaction in the literature vary and the concept is often operationalized according to the perspective of the authors.

Several models and frameworks have been proposed to explore the multidimensional construct of interaction in online courses, directly or indirectly (e.g., Anderson 2003b; Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Roblyer & Wienke, 2003, 2004; Hirumi, 2013; Rovai, 2002; Moore, 2013; Sammons, 2007). Moore's (1989) types of interaction—learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction—have been widely studied in research and discussed in the literature of distance education. Scholars in the field have also dedicated chapters exploring Moore's types of interaction (e.g., Anderson, 2003b; Anderson & Kuskis, 2007; Friesen & Kuskis, 2013; Moore & Kearsly, 2012; Simonson et al., 2015). The three types of interaction proposed by Moore (1989) have been used in many research studies to frame the analysis of interaction in distance education, and findings have supported the importance of the three types of interaction according to the meta-analysis conducted by Bernard et al. (2009).

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