Chapter 7

Qualitative Case Method and Web-Based Learning: The Application of Qualitative Research Methods to the Systematic Evaluation of Web-Based Learning Assessment Results

Sandra Hansmann
University of Texas Pan American, USA

Learning Objectives

• After reading this chapter and considering the issues, you will be able to:
  • Distinguish “traditional” from “alternative” measures.
  • Describe “qualitative inquiry.”
  • Summarize the role of the instructor.
  • Summarize the data collection method.
  • Define the terms: “open coding,” “axial coding,” and “selective coding.”
  • Devise a role for phase theory in alternative Web-based educational research.
• Define the terms: “peer debriefing,” “audit trail,” “thick description,” “triangulation,” “prolonged and persistent inquiry.”

Abstract

This chapter proposes a methodological framework for the use of qualitative research techniques in the evaluation of learning outcomes in Web-based courses. Topics include the use of alternative evaluation measures in Web-based courses and the appropriateness of a qualitative approach using WebCT course tools. The advantages of qualitative inquiry as an evaluative tool are considered and data collection methods are also discussed. The chapter also includes commentary on the unique role of the instructor as a qualitative researcher in Web-based interactions. Suggestions for the analysis, interpretation, and generalization of data are provided along with open, axial, and selective coding options. The chapter also includes consideration of critical limitations of the qualitative approach, including evaluator bias and transferability.

Introduction

The primary purpose of this chapter is to propose a methodological framework for the application of qualitative research methods in the systematic evaluation of learning assessment results in Web-based courses. To that end, this chapter:
• Discusses several key advantages of qualitative inquiry as a means of evaluating student learning outcomes.
• Describes useful qualitative data collection methods and links those data collection techniques to specific data sources afforded by Web-based course environments.
• Describes useful qualitative data analysis techniques and provides specific suggestions for analysis and interpretation of assessment results.
• Considers methods for insuring the validity of analysis and interpretation, along with techniques for minimizing evaluator bias.
• Delineates critical limitations of the qualitative approach.

While the approach proposed in this chapter could be used in courses that are not necessarily Web-based, there is unique value in application to Web-based course assessment. Insofar as it strives to develop a holistic sense of each student, the utilization of qualitative inquiry in evaluating assessment results may help address some of the common concerns related to Web-based instruction. These include the lack of face-to-face interactions and the loss of visual and intuitive cues many teachers use to assessed student learning, especially in practice based courses. The evaluative process
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