

Chapter 10

Quality Assurance in E-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Quality is a subjective concept, and as such, there are many criteria for assuring quality, including assessment practices based on industry standards and accreditation requirements. Most assessments, including quality assurance in e-learning, frequently occur at three levels: individual course assessments, department or program assessments, and institutional assessments; frequently these levels cannot be distinctly delineated. While student evaluations are usually included within these frameworks, student views are but one variable in the quality assessment equation. To offer some plausible perspectives of how students view quality, this chapter will provide an overview of quality assurance for online learning from the course, program, and institutional viewpoints as well as review some of the key research related to students' assessment of what constitutes quality in online courses.

INTRODUCTION

Quality is a subjective concept and, therefore, is open to interpretation by the many stakeholders involved in higher education. These stakeholders include students, alumni, faculty, administrators,

parents, oversight boards, employers, state legislatures, local governing bodies, transfer institutions, and the public. Because of the diversity of stakeholders, Cleary (2001) suggests that "Each college or university, via its constituents, should determine what constitutes quality on its campus" (p. 20). Institutions can then identify suitable performance indicators to use in assessing goal

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achievement (i.e., improving student learning outcomes).

In education, there are many criteria for assuring quality. The most widely used criteria are based on industry practices and/or are described within academic accreditation standards. The guidance provided by both industry and accreditation standards has evolved over time; concurrently, e-learning has emerged as a strong and viable approach alongside traditional instruction. Thus, quality standards also have evolved to encompass principles and best practices for online education. Many of the current guidelines, regardless of their origins or applications, have been designed in much the same way as traditional quality management standards used in industry, such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) (NIST, 2009a) and ISO 9000 (ISO, 2009b)—that is, to be non-prescriptive and adaptable. That is, these general guidelines provide a framework for building a quality management system, but do not specify how to fulfill or achieve the elements stipulated within the framework.

In business, the elements of such frameworks are achieved through programs such as Total Quality Management (Ahire, Landeros, & Golhar, 1995), Lean (Shah & Ward, 2007) or Six Sigma (Schroeder, Linderman, Liedtke, & Choo, 2008). In education, these elements are fulfilled at the discretion of the faculty/instructors who have a professional obligation to continuously improve instruction (Goodson, Miertschin, Stewart, & Faulkenberry, 2009) and through a variety of instructional design and delivery monitoring processes at the program or course level. This approach for assuring quality is suited for the education environment where, with only general guidelines to follow, academicians still have considerable freedom to conduct their courses as they see fit. That is, instructors usually establish their own learning objectives for a given subject and determine how to assess and evaluate their courses to ensure and continuously improve educational quality (SACS, 2008).

CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) in higher education, which began in the early 1990s, is based on the principles and practices of Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM has been widely used in the business community as a strategy to motivate the constant improvement of work processes to exceed customers' expectations (Dean & Bowen, 1994). Within higher education, TQM has often been successfully applied to administrative operations (Montano & Utter, 1999). CQI, however, is the preferred term when referring to improving the design and administration of academic programs or courses because it emphasizes traditions with which scholars are already familiar – constantly striving for a higher goal (i.e., to seek out and implement best practices including new learning modalities, teaching methods, facilitation strategies, etc.).

For example, when a course is scheduled to be offered more than once, many instructors update their syllabi and add new content to the course through revised activities or different reading assignments. Such actions encompass the basic notion of what it means to continuously improve quality in education, and CQI practices provide educators with a method for rethinking the way they approach teaching and learning activities in an effort to do their best to improve student learning outcomes (AAHE, 1994). Actions taken by individual faculty members to improve courses are often informal and undocumented; and thus, while extremely important, do not provide evidence of CQI that can be used by programs and institutions to assure various constituencies that their programs are both high quality and effective. Formal CQI initiatives help institutions set goals, identify necessary resources and strategies, and then measure progress towards fulfilling their ideal purpose (Moore, 2002).

Formal CQI initiatives usually involve documentation of efforts at an institutional or

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