Chapter 31
Assuring Quality in Online Course Delivery

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses upon the critical issue of assuring quality online course delivery by examining four key components of online teaching and learning. The topic of course delivery within this article is viewed as a cultural issue that permeates processes from the design of an online course to the evaluation of an online course. First, this chapter will examine and review key components of, and tools for designing high impact online courses that support student learning. Second, this chapter will provide suggestions for faculty teaching online courses to assist in creating high quality online courses that supports teaching and, consequently, facilitates opportunities for student learning. Quality online course delivery is also contingent upon the support of faculty by administration. Lastly, this chapter will provide suggestions for conducting course evaluation and a feedback loops the for continual improvement of the online learning and teaching. These four components are essential elements in assuring quality online courses.

BACKGROUND

Few would argue that online teaching and learning has been and is on a meteoric rise. David Nagel (2009), in fact, predicted that by 2014 over 10 Million PreK-12 students will be taking online courses. A cursory search in Google Scholar

showed that over 2.3 million hits were found when searching for "online education". However, when the precursor "quality" was added to "online education" the search results declined to 1,050 articles. While this is a somewhat flawed example, it does illustrate a dilemma that has faced the field of online teaching and learning—ensuring quality while delivering course content and engaging students within online environments

has not garnered the attention that it has deserved. The topic of course delivery to ensure quality within this chapter is viewed as a cultural issue that permeates processes from the design to the evaluation of an online course.

It may first be helpful to highlight three myths and misconceptions about online teaching and learning. These myths/misconceptions are held by students, faculty, and administrators and influence any discussion about the quality of online course delivery (e.g., White, n.d.):

1. Online teaching and learning is 'worse' (or 'better') for meeting student learning outcomes than face-to-face courses.
2. Online teaching and learning is easier and more convenient for students and faculty than face-to-face courses.
3. Online teaching and learning is less interactive for both student and faculty than face-to-face courses.

All of these statements are based upon the premise that there are no special affordances or constraints of the environment, either online or face-to-face, when it comes to teaching or learning-that we are comparing apples to apples. It has been argued elsewhere that this is not the case, that there are many fundamental differences that the educational environment both affords or constraints (Anderson, 2004; Matuga, 2001, 2005 & 2007) and that establishing a dichotomistic relationship does not adequately reflect the complexity of teaching or learning within either environment. In essence, learning and teaching within online environments is fundamentally *different* than learning and teaching in face-to-face environments. One is not comparing apples to apples, but more like apples to oranges.

A useful concept to use as a framework, one that more adequately reflects the complexity of online teaching and learning, would be to view both through the lens of a cultural system. There are many definitions of culture and descriptions of

what constitute a cultural system. LeVine (1984), for example, defined culture as "a shared organization of ideas that includes the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative actions" (p. 67). Others have claimed that these organizations of ideas and meanings derived from actions are not static and that culture should be thought of as systems that may be more complicated and organic collections of cognitive functions, practices, and meaning (D'Andrade, 2001; Giddens, 1984; Kitayama, 2002). Online teaching and learning may be viewed as cultural systems in that understandings and meanings are socially shared within online environments (Courtney, 2001; Mehlinger & Powers, 2002). There are also cultural practices and customs within these environments that may be linked, in various ways, to the values and beliefs of larger cultural systems, like face-to-face educational environments (Courtney, 2001; LeVine, 1984).

A more traditional view of cultural systems, for example, is based upon the idea that they contain within them, nested systems that are interdependent to the functioning of the system as a whole (White, 1975). This view holds that technological (or physical subsystem), social, and psychological factors guide a multitude of functions and influence the behaviors of individuals that are participating in cultural communities (Kityama, 2002; White, 1975). For example, Kitayama (2002) stated that "each person's psychological processes and structures are organized though the active effort to coordinate his or her behaviors with the pertinent cultural systems of practices and public meanings" (p. 92). While this is may be viewed as a valid preposition, this view does imply that there are somewhat distinct sub-systems that guide or organize psychological processes and practices. It may be quite common to reduce discussions regarding online teaching and learning to cultural sub-systems, like technological ones, for example, because the impact of technology may be seen as

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