Chapter 11
Managing Quality in Online Education

Teresa L. Coffman
University of Mary Washington, USA

Mary Beth Klinger
College of Southern Maryland, USA

ABSTRACT

Online education is advancing the world over and recent emphasis has focused on the quality of online learning and student outcomes. This chapter focuses on managing quality in online learning design through two different project management approaches at two different institutions of higher education. University X instituted a pilot program of faculty and instructional designers to initiate online course development at this University and to identify and define quality in the online course design process. College Y has had a successful online cadre of courses and programs and recently adopted a for-purchase quality initiative through Quality Matters. Courses are put through the Quality Matters evaluation process to determine strengths and weaknesses. Both institutions will continue to offer online education as an alternative to traditional, classroom courses and both will continue to monitor quality as a key indicator of student learning and online course success.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is now a major focus in higher education. This important alternative to traditional, classroom learning demands attention and respect from academic institutions in order to maintain competitiveness in the educational marketplace as technologies advance, budgets narrow, and student needs change.

Due to the varying demands of today's learner, online program and course offerings continue to flourish. As online learning moves out of the growth stage and into the maturity stage of the product life cycle, the quality of education taught online is now a central theme. In this chapter, quality is defined as maintaining a high level of teaching within the college or university to ensure student achievement and learning as well as the maintenance and prestige of the institution

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of higher education itself within the internal and external community.

For many organizations, quality is created and maintained through a structured process-driven approach. A project management strategy is utilized across the organization to create a strategic framework of processes that streamline development and, at the same time, maintain quality measures within the produced product. The project management approach uses a team of specialists to help manage the design and development process through assigning specific roles for each team member and within the process itself, as well as building in necessary checks and balances to guide each member to completion.

Within an educational institution, a project management approach can be integrated into the development of online courses by coupling a faculty member, who is familiar with the content knowledge and has teaching experience, with an instructional designer, technician, and/or technologist who can provide the structure needed to manage the process to success (Parscal & Riemer, 2010). Adding a team approach to course design has the ability to provide a systematic process through the creation of a framework that includes quality measures that can be checked by each team member and built into the process (Chapman & Nicolet, 2003).

As colleges and universities experience increased student enrollment, especially for online course offerings, more defined polices and management processes will need to be developed and adhered to in order to maintain the quality and rigor within the online class.

BACKGROUND

Implementing Quality Initiatives in Online Higher Education

As innovative ideas from industry move into education, there is a push to begin researching and ultimately incorporating these pioneering themes into the learning environment. With this said, most educational institutions are aware that innovation in the marketplace does not necessarily spell quality and may not provide them with the competitive edge they desire. This is especially true if the innovation is incorporated within the institutional fabric without the full support of the academic community (Chao, Saj, & Tessier, 2006).

Implementing new agenda items requires the development of a strategic plan, support from the academic community, and incorporation of the conceptual framework and overarching mission. In order for online learning to be successful within accredited institutions of higher education, two main things must occur:

1. Viability of the medium and teaching paradigms must be identified; and
2. Quality measures must be developed that take into account faculty and university needs, course revisions, curriculum changes, and staffing changes.

As these measures are identified and developed, faculty constituents must be involved and support must be provided by students, the administration, and university board members. Without this support, online initiatives will not be successful and quality control measures will not take shape (Chao, et al., 2006).

Online learning paradigms often involve a heated debate between major constituents within the university, usually lead by faculty, about the worth of online courses to the institute of higher education and if funding should be allotted to develop and maintain online program development. These discussions usually always ask the question: *Does online learning provide students with high-quality learning and how should online learning environments be compared to traditional approaches to teaching and student learning?* (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).