Chapter 17
Evaluation of Course Curriculum and Teaching:
Guidelines for Higher Education Instructors

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ABSTRACT

In order to be effective teachers, higher education instructors must do more than evaluate the content of their courses. They need to assess curriculum design and methods used for teaching and assessing student learning. This can be challenging since instructors may receive little training in effective methods for teaching adult learners. This chapter explains the reasons why instructors should evaluate their courses and describes the characteristics of effective course curricula, teaching methods, and procedures for assessing student learning. A Curriculum Evaluation Checklist is proposed as a useful tool that has practical benefits for instructors who evaluate their curricula and teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Evaluating our performance is an essential element of skills development. Employers evaluate employee work performance; sports coaches assess their players' skills; voters evaluate political leaders; educators evaluate students' learning. Evaluation is the keystone for improving our

abilities and performance. We evaluate ourselves in order to measure our progress, plan future goals, prepare for external evaluation, or market our skills. Self-evaluation is also a professional responsibility to meet standards for competence and continuously improve the quality of our work performance.

In higher education, instructors evaluate their teaching. However, this can be a challenging task since it requires assessing various aspects of teach-

ing, including course design, content, teaching and learning methods, and assessing student learning. University and college faculty and instructors may be experts in their discipline or course content, but they often receive little training in effective methods for teaching adult learners. There are many methods that instructors may use to improve their teaching skills: continuing-education, self-study, reviewing student feedback from formal student evaluation surveys, and peer evaluation of teaching. However, assessing whether these methods produce curricula and teaching methods which actually improve course outcomes requires a method for identifying and measuring the characteristics of effective course curricula and teaching.

This chapter will explain the purpose of evaluating our courses, describe characteristics of effective course curricula and delivery, suggest a useful checklist for curriculum evaluation, and describe practical benefits for instructors who evaluate their curricula and teaching.

BACKGROUND

Why Evaluate our Courses?

Higher education learning occurs through three processes: curriculum which disseminates knowledge, pedagogy that effectively communicates curriculum, and evaluation that assesses how well students learn (Shay, 2011). Successful teaching therefore requires competence in each of these areas: Curriculum content should be clear, relevant, meaningful, and up-to-date; instructors' pedagogical skills should successfully communicate course content, engage students, adapt to student learning styles, and encourage critical thinking; and course assignments or evaluation methods should accurately measure student learning and provide feedback that helps students track progress and plan further learning goals (Diamond, 2008). Evaluating these three processes presents four

challenges (Spiel, Schober, & Reimann, 2006). Course evaluation must first assess whether educational goals are attained. Secondly, definitions of course goals and methods should reflect the views of both teachers and learners, and thirdly, the evaluation should assess what should be communicated in a course compared to what actually is communicated. Finally, both teachers and students should participate in course evaluation.

In order to assess whether a course accomplishes educational goals, the course curriculum must identify specific goals for student learning (Shipley, 1994), have a logical and meaningful progression of lessons (Fallows & Steven, 2000), and describe benchmark criteria for measuring student learning (Aggarwal et al., 2006). While student feedback and grades provide feedback about curriculum design and teaching, they do not adequately differentiate course elements that work well from those that do not (Spiel et al., 2006). Criteria that define effective curriculum and teaching are needed.

Effective courses accomplish the expectations of educational institutions, instructors, and students. Instructors and educational institutions identify the foundational and specialized knowledge and skills that are required to demonstrate competence in a particular area of study (Kuh & Ewell, 2010). They also need valid methods for measuring this competence. Course curricula must demonstrate these components in order to meet expectations of accreditation bodies, governments, and communities. From students' perspectives, effective courses build on what they have previously learned and prepare them for future careers and life-long learning (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000; Lieb, 1991; Thoms, 2001). They wish to be actively involved in the learning process (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). They value teaching methods which incorporate real-life situations and workplace scenarios (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004) and help them learn the practical knowledge and skills needed in the workplace

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