Chapter 2.21
Toward a Comprehensive Model of E–Learning Evaluation:
The Components

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INTRODUCTION

Whether one is at conferences, responding to e-mail, or chatting with colleagues, the topic of e-learning is bound to prompt a discussion related to assessment and evaluation. But there are many aspects of e-learning evaluation. Naturally, most are interested in comparisons between online and traditional instruction. Others want to know about the effectiveness of the instructors or the instructional designers in designing interactive and engaging courses. Of course, given the newness of this area, some ask for information about what the training actually provided them. Still others might inquire about what makes some courses and programs highly popular while others are seemingly hidden from view. Those focused on pedagogy might analyze the course tasks and syllabi, while those with technological interests might favor an exploration of the courseware tools and services. Finally, administrators and managers of e-learning might request evaluations of e-learning policies, partnerships, return on investment, and strategic planning. When asked to evaluate e-learning, therefore, the focus of that evaluation must be clearly specified and detailed.

Evaluation is often confused with assessment. According to Susan Millar (2001), director of the Learning through Evaluation, Adaptation, and Dissemination (LEAD) Center at the University of Wisconsin, assessment typically refers to an instructor's efforts to obtain specific information about student learning within a course in order to improve her teaching or to demonstrate

student learning and achievement to others. More generally, it is a way of using information obtained through various types of measurement to determine a learner's performance or skill on some task or situation (Rosenkrans, 2000). Hence, it is typically learner focused.

Evaluation is often at a more encompassing level, though it can include the assessment of student learning. Simply put, an evaluation is concerned with judging a program's worth and is essentially conducted to aid the decisions of the stakeholders (Champagne & Wisher, 2000). The level of evaluation will depend on articulating the type or level of the stakeholders. In corporations, the stakeholders may range from high-level executives to training managers to the developers or instructors of that training. In higher education, the stakeholders might be the learners, the directors of distributed learning, the local community, the faculty, the campus administrators, or the state. In the government, stakeholders include human resource development department heads, agency directors, and congressional committee members.

Duin and Bear (2002) point out that evaluation becomes even more complex when there are partnerships between one or more of these entities. For instance, if an e-learning company partnered with a major public university to develop and test a new courseware platform or component, each might be interested in different outcome data. According to Duin and Baer, students should benefit from enhanced course availability, efficient scheduling, increased career opportunities, and the availability of learning resources on demand. In addition, the university may benefit from new capabilities in offering online content, growing enrollments, enhanced learning, and new marketing opportunities. State politicians might be interested in cost efficiencies, increased competitiveness, improved student learning, and higher student completion rates. College faculty members might focus on how the partnership fosters a more relevant curriculum and increased opportunities to facilitate

student learning and problem solving. In addition, corporate partners might be interested in how the courseware platform will retain customers, provide a competitive advantage, and of course, increase revenues through retaining customers as well as developing new revenue streams (CIO, 2001; Docent, 2000). Clearly, the focus of e-learning evaluation differs widely and depends on the stakeholder's perspective.

So while some in higher education might target questions such as whether students learned more online than in traditional classes, corporate concerns might focus solely on return on investment (Aldrich, 2002; Reddy, 2002; Worthen, 2001). Given the complexity of e-learning evaluation, the goal of this chapter is to expand on a key section of Khan's (2000) eight-part framework for Web-based learning—namely, the area of evaluation.

COMPONENTS IN E-LEARNING EVALUATION

Evaluation of e-learning is often squarely focused on whether the online course or component is better than a comparable face-to-face version of the course. Unfortunately, most Web-based learning studies are deficient in one or more areas. Moreover, there is little consensus as to what variables to measure and compare (Champagne & Wisher, 2000; Olson & Wisher, 2002). Part of the problem is that few e-learning courses are purely online, but instead, most rely on a blended approach, combining online and live components.

Taking this complexity into account, Figure 1 displays the range of considerations for an e-learning evaluation plan. Each slice of the eight-part evaluation pie involves a number of issues and questions. For example, in terms of the first slice or "student" level of evaluation:

1. What are student attitudes toward the e-learning course or program?

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