

Chapter 10

Design Guidelines for Self–Assessment Support for Adult Academic Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

This contribution focuses on adult distance learning. Based on experiences at the Open University of the Netherlands we investigate specific problems that our students have with self-assessment and metacognition while studying. Starting from a literature review and complementing this with available student data from our teaching research center, we developed a conceptual framework that was iteratively adjusted and assessed by a questionnaire study and interviews. This allowed us to develop design guidelines for self-assessment support in distance learning environments. These guidelines were reviewed by experts. The input from the experts was used to modify the guidelines and iterate until they were considered complete. Tangible designs (i.e., mock-ups) for each of the self-assessment methods were proposed. These tangible designs were prototyped for later evaluation. Finally, we provide our conclusions and propose recommendations for actual application and systematic design.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-320-1.ch010

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims at providing grounded design-guidelines for self-assessment support for learners. The application domain, adult academic distance learning, is based on our context of work: The Open University of the Netherlands (OUN), a Dutch university for adult distance learning. Our university is funded by the government to make higher education accessible to anyone with the necessary aptitudes and interests, regardless of formal qualifications. Students can study at their own pace and at their own venue. Therefore, OUN students are a heterogeneous group of learners with diverse goals and needs. Flexibility and learning independence in study activities are among the main motivations for studying at the OUN. Lack of interaction and feeling of isolation are some of the disadvantages associated to distance learning, and OUN teachers generally consider this one of the main reasons for the low graduation rates in comparison to those at “traditional” Dutch universities.

In order to keep the type of students in mind, as well as to reason about their needs, we developed a set of personas, based on what our university statistics tell us about relevant student characteristics such as age, employment, family context, location, educational background, learning activities, and learning goals.

Sonja

Sonja is 23 years old and works as a waitress in a town in Flanders, Belgium. She started working when she finished high school. She works every day from noon until 10:00 PM which does not leave her too much spare time. Last year she decided that she would like to change her job and start working as a therapist in a help-center close to her town. That’s why she joined the OUN and started studying Psychology. She has been studying for ten months and has successfully completed almost all of the courses in the first year of Psychology.

She wants to obtain her Bachelor’s degree in three years and maybe then continue to complete a Master’s degree in Pedagogy.

Marta

Marta is 47 years old, is married, and has two young children. She works as a civil servant at the provincial level dealing with environmental regulatory policy who had studied environmental science but lacks the Law and Policy.

She is really good at her job. However, she has a weak point: legal issues. Although she had a class in Law during her secretarial education, she often lacks the necessary knowledge to understand the complex problems of the company and she has to ask her colleagues for help. Some months ago she decided to study Law at the OUN. It would be nice to obtain a Bachelor degree, maybe she could even get a better job, but her main priority is to obtain knowledge which she can apply to her daily work-related problems.

Peter

Peter is 76 years old. He used to work as a Professor of Math at the Technical University Eindhoven but now he is happily retired. He has plenty of free time and he likes to spend it taking care of his garden, going for walks in the woods, and growing vegetables and cooking them. He is very keen on natural sciences and would like to know more about so that he can better understand the physical environment that he so enjoys. That’s why he decided to take some courses at the OUN. He does not want to obtain a degree, but he enjoys reading the texts sitting in the garden with a cup of tea.

Dirk

Dirk is 45 years old. He is married and has a little baby. He works in a large IT company in Amsterdam as a consultant. During the 15 years he has been working at the company, he has obtained

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