

Chapter 5

Quality in K–20 E–Learning Processes: Frameworks and Variables

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ABSTRACT

E-Learning quality, as with many other theoretical developments about quality, is an open-ended issue. Depending on the perspective, on the way to tackle it, on the aspects everyone considers important, definitions of quality may be different. Even quality issues are distinctly perceived by the management staff, the teachers, and, of course, the students. K-20 students are mature enough to detect which aspects are positive and which deficient. In other words, they are more than able to perceive the quality level of the e-Learning contexts in which they are enrolled. Fortunately, research performed during the last years has produced useful frameworks, guidelines, recommendations, specifications, good practices, benchmarks, etc., with the aim of improving quality in e-Learning. These documents help managers, stakeholders, and teachers to understand the e-Learning variables and their relations and influence on students. Educational actors may use them to improve the quality of their K-20 e-Learning programs. In short, this chapter introduces readers into the most common e-Learning quality concepts and the key points they must observe and ensure in K-20 e-Learning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

From a diachronic perspective, the number of e-Learning activities for K-20 students has increased exponentially. Quality assurance has become a crucial issue for the organizations, which are dealing with these students. In the twenty cen-

tury, traditional educational technology began to gather numerous instructional designs to enhance learning, as those of Bloom, Ausubel, Merrill, Gagné, Reigeluth, etc. Currently, in the twenty-first century, the turn for improving e-Learning has arisen.

However, as in many other contexts, the definition of quality in e-Learning is an open-ended issue. There exist multiple definitions, just as dif-

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ferent perspectives to tackle it. Choosing or applying either quality system, may cause the student's future online experiences become something superb or lead to a great disappointment. These differences may prompt K-20 students and teachers to accepting or rejecting e-Learning. As Phipps and Merisotis (2000, p. vii) wrote, "Proponents ooze with blind adoration, declaring that online learning can solve all the problems confronting traditional education. Opponents insist that courses taught on the net are incapable of living up to the standards of the traditional bricks and mortar classroom."

At first, we will deal with what e-Learning quality is, through some definitions of it. There will be also an exposition of the problems generated by a more and more intensive use of technologies in K-20 education, in places where there is no existence of specific quality assurance plans for e-Learning. These problems should be addressed by the organization managers, the teachers, and even the students. They are related to infrastructures, equipment, space-time considerations, educational materials and methodologies, students' perceptions and expectations and so on. This section will provide examples about some of these important issues.

Quality is the evaluation about a process, product, or service, as an object to study (Rodrigo & Sarasa, 2006). Quality tries to measure in what degree a group of characteristics of this object fulfills a collection of previously established requirements. Other definition refers to quality as the group of characteristics of a product or service able to determine the degree in which this product or service satisfies the needs of the consumer (Descartes, 2005). Therefore, quality is a relative concept because it is related to market and satisfaction. So, it is always reasonable to expect the e-Learning quality is in consonance with the price paid for the product or service.

The European Quality Observatory (Ehlers, Goertz, Hildebrandt, & Pawlowski, 2005, p. 16) defined quality in e-Learning contexts as

"any policies, procedures, rules, criteria, tools, checklists or any other verification instruments and mechanisms that have the purpose of ensuring and enhancing the quality of any e-Learning offering". This citation fairly represents what is quality embracing in e-Learning, but there exist a plethora of definitions.

From several forums it has been noticed the need of a consensus to reach a common definition of e-Learning quality. Stakeholders of education defend that a harmonized conception of e-Learning quality is a prerequisite for a properly functioning "market" in e-Learning products and services. According to (Baruque, Baruque, & Melo, 2007) many organizations are still experimenting with e-Learning, using different approaches, applying different technologies and models for the delivery of e-Learning contents.

In the most the cases, the persons in charge of K-20 education institutions take decisions related to quality, taking as starting point nonstandard documents. Sometimes it is just no e-Learning policy. Furthermore, e-Learning policy decisions are quite often based on economic or even ideological criteria, instead of pedagogical concerns. For example, an institution may decide all their instructors use only free software in e-Learning processes, which affects students, of course. These decisions may be away from the best technical solutions as much as from the students' demands. At the same time, next to these decisions, which are usually out of reach for students and subjects, important internal factors are affecting the quality of courses. Once we are referring to a particular e-Learning course, the management team of the organization hardly counts with accurate information about its online development and, therefore, the institution cannot carry out a full quality control. Too many issues of some subjects are hidden for the institution because they are depending on the teachers' free online intervention. Students perceive to a greater extent the aspects directly developed by their teachers, even more than those

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