Defining Quality in Online Education: Definitions and Factors from the US and Ukraine

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Research in online education has rarely addressed the issue of quality. It often seems that economic interests are prioritized over educational interests, and so educational products are developed with little regard to quality. A literature review and discussions with instructors of higher education from the United States and Ukraine reveal that the development of quality in online education requires a definition of quality which fuses the interests of all stakeholders in online education: the student, the instructor, the educational institution, and the employer. Factors that contribute to quality from the perspective of each stakeholder are examined. Those factors are then combined to create an understanding of quality in online education. Recommendations for implementation and further research are included.

Key Words: Quality in Education, Online Education, Andragogy, Teaching Online

Introduction

Online education, part of a new wave of educational change, has distinctive characteristics (White & Weight, 2000) including the facilitation of student's educational pursuits by removing distance and time constraints. Students and instructors involved with online courses are finding new methods of learning and teaching, including the use of asynchronous communication, ongoing and multiple threaded discussions, and web designed lecturettes.

Since the term *quality in online higher education* appears extensively in reports and empirical papers, the important question is how quality in online education is defined and how it may differ from quality in traditional, lecture-based classrooms. A new definition of quality in online education requires agreement between the various perspectives of multiple stakeholders including the student, the instructor, the educational institution, and the employer.

This paper also examines key factors that contribute to quality of online education. These key factors are ascertained from a literature review and discussions with American and Ukrainian university instructors.

Defining Quality

The word *quality* originated in 1290 and is derived from Old French *qualite* and Latin *qualitas*. The root of these words, *qualis,* refers to the degree of excellence of an item. In the case of online education, as with any educational delivery system, the degree of excellence is determined by its ability to satisfy the needs of various stakeholders.

Education is a derivative word of the English verb *educate* that originated from Latin *educatus,* of *educere,* meaning *to bring up,* and is related to *educere* meaning *to* bring out and to lead (Collins English Dictionary, 1994). Thus *education* is defined as the action or process of educating or of being educated. *Online education* can be generally defined as the act or process of education using internet technology to deliver the course or prescribed series of courses in a curriculum.

In an effort to assess quality, The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) required business schools to measure online course outcomes (Edwards & Brannen, 1990; AACSB, 1980). The focus of these evaluations has changed to measure what the student has actually *learned.*

Most of the research in online education has focused on technology, behavioral characteristics of students and instructors, and satisfaction of the course participants (Arbaugh 2005). The Sloan Consortium (Bourne & Moore, 2004) discusses student satisfaction, but more specifically, the learning effectiveness of various delivery systems as factors that affect quality.

Conceptualizing Quality in Online Education

Conceptualizations of quality in online education focus on specific stakeholders in the educational process. For example, Scanlan (2003) concludes that assessing students who have participated in online courses can be a means to assess quality, while Brooks (2003) argues that attitudes of instructors toward online learning impact quality. Yueng (2001) lists instructor and student support, course development, course structure, and how the institution evaluates online learning as factors affecting quality, but does not integrate these perceptions or even mention marketplace forces or employers. Prestera and Moller (2001) insist that educational institutions need to actively support quality in online education through processes, structures and feedback systems that are aligned with organizational goals. These researchers all identify pieces of the puzzle and illustrate that each stakeholder of online education has a unique perspective of quality based on their own individual needs. Yet, as these critical groups collaborate, quality is outside the interactive process. Figure 1 shows the current use of *quality* from the perspective of these stakeholders.

Figure 1
Current Conceptualization of Quality in Online Education
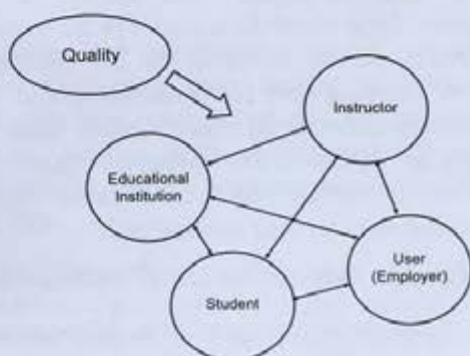
What is needed is a focus on the linkage between these stakeholders to create a system supporting quality. A better approach places *quality* as the primary guiding value of all interactions. Figure 2 illustrates how such collaboration might exist. A synthesized definition of quality in online education provides the focal point for collaboration and creates quality from all stakeholders' perspectives.

Figure 2.
Hypothesized Conceptualization of Quality in Online Education
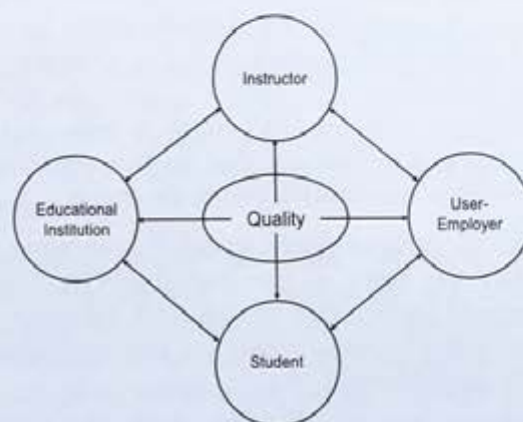
This paper used a modified Delphi Group technique to gather input from professors in the United States and Ukraine to develop a definition of quality of online education.

Responses from Professors in the United States

Professors in the United States indicate that quality online education must include the *success of students achieving the goals that led them to seek the education*. The ability of students to reason critically and creatively and to apply the teachings in the workplace was emphasized.

Reputation of the institution in the community also affects the perception of quality in courses offered by the institution. Some professors noted that institutions must establish rigorous acceptance standards for instructors and students alike, with defined standards that fit researched profiles for success before students are admitted to online programs. Online education offers global availability to all that desire to participate and this allows students to cross social, political, and cultural boundaries and seek admission to a global inventory of educational institutions. American professors also identified the needs of students as defined by employers, delivery of systems, usability of the educational outcomes, and methodology of development as factors to consider when defining quality in education. The accreditation process, particularly as established by AACSB, is considered very important in assessing quality of the total education process, including online curriculums.

Responses from Professors in the Ukraine

Online education should also serve the purpose of inspiring the growth and intelligence of students. Ukrainian professors believe that quality of online education is affected by the instructor's knowledge and ability to motivate students to continually seek new knowledge. To achieve quality, the institution must support instructors' efforts to learn and apply instructional techniques that sustain reflection and knowledge construction within the course.

One Ukrainian professor stated, "…education should satisfy the needs of the student-user to become a specialist in the labor market, and the needs of the employer who would apply the students' knowledge in the professional arena."

Professors from the United States and Ukraine agree that the four differentiated stakeholders in defining quality online education include the student, the instructor, the employer, and the educational institution. Accordingly, a definition of online quality education can be conceptualized as:

Quality online education is acquired knowledge and skills brought about by computer-mediated technology and constructivist educational collaborative practices. Quality online education facilitates an environment of reflection and knowledge construction and requires a global perspective. Quality is determined interdependently by participating stakeholders that include students, instructors, employers, and educational institutions.

Unique Factors Affecting the Quality of Online Education

As research indicates, unique factors affecting the quality of online education include use of technology, reflection and knowledge construction, institutional support for other stakeholders, and a global perspective that affects each stakeholder in the educational process. This is not necessarily different from factors that affect quality education regardless of format, but the emphasis is considerably different.

Use of Technology

The convergence of technology and education is more than integrating technology into a curriculum to deliver a course. It entails consideration and evaluation of the effectiveness of one type of technology against another (Landsberger, 2004).

Gilbert (2002) proposes using a low threshold application that is reliable, accessible, easy to learn, non-intimidating, and incrementally inexpensive. The pause before response allowed by the technology enables students to synthesize theory and discern discourse and dialogue, improving explanatory and cognitive learning, and allows social interaction. Technology enables asynchronous student dialogue, ease of open and private communication among students and with the instructor, and fosters reflection and knowledge construction. Technology should reduce the social distance between instructors and students (Brooks, 2003) and enable peer-to-peer collaborative learning and instructor-to-student learning.

Reflection and Knowledge Construction

An online education environment that requires interaction and reflection by all students in the course supports knowledge construction. Knowledge that is meaningful to all stakeholders is created in a student centered environment through this integrating process (Edwards & Brannen, 1990).

Educational programs need to provide students with knowledge that will later be used to support professional and specialty workplace needs. The student reads discussion comments from the professor or peer-cohort, discerns the personal relevance of information presented, reflects on the theory and constructs, and creates a personal response. Time constraints found in the lecture-based classroom are not found in the 24/7 online course, thereby allowing time for discernment and reflection of educational material (Berry, 2004). Reflection and knowledge construction produce quality among students in online courses because learning is personally relevant and internalized.

Institutional Support for Other Stakeholders

Institutions can support quality in online education by supporting instructors, employees, and students. Administrators of educational institutions must give attention to what is valued and rewarded within an academic environment if they want to engage and influence instructors in the importance of distance education. Issues of concern by instructors include increased workloads, criteria used for tenure and promotion, intellectual property rights, and scholarship criteria in online course development and teaching models (Scanlan, 2003). Activities related to

the development of scholarship for online are expected to enhance the learning of faculty, and administrators must attend to the needs of instructors by establishing clear guidelines for development of online education (Brooks, 2003; Prestera & Moller, 2001).

Previously, the employer has not considered a stakeholder in an integrated perspective in creating quality online education. Employer mentors and the importance of professional perspective are generally ignored in the transition from classroom to profession, yet can bring a critical perspective to the learning community:

> They provide the learning community with important input on curriculum. They are able to provide information to faculty and others in the community about what knowledge is lacking in their field and what knowledge students can bring in order to advance the profession. As the secondary consumer of student education, it is essential they be involved in the learning community. This may have the supplementary effect of dispelling the myth that distance education is second-rate education. By involving professionals in our learning communities we expose them to the quality of education we are providing (Lancaster and Nickel, 2001: 6-7).

Employers, in a 300 manager survey, responded that student interaction with faculty and practitioners, interaction with each other and the opportunity to conduct projects with practitioners is extremely important for online graduate programs (Nickel, et al., 2002).

Students use their membership in educational institutions to promote self identity and develop skills and center behaviors (Tsui, 1992). An important role for educational institutions is in creating conditions for inclusion of students into the learning culture to support and promote this self identity. Cultural inclusion of students promotes retention, aids in learning, and builds quality in educational programs (Tsui, 1992). Educational institutions can incorporate students into educational cultures through market and brand identification, seminars, presentations, internships, and links with the practitioner

community within their disciplines, and these are all fully possible in the online environment.

Reframing the Definition of Quality in Online Education

The rapid growth of online education compels a new focus in developing quality programs. The definition of quality must be reframed to include all stakeholders. Education is no longer contained within the walls of a *brick and mortar* institution of higher learning.

Measuring quality in online education includes examining the use of technology and education, teaching models that create knowledge construction, institutions that rethink instructor support, and efforts to include all students and faculty into organizational culture. Further research might consider the following:

- Does the convergence of technology and education require a new theory of education?

- How can faculty be supported or motivated to teach online courses?

- How can cultural, political and social barriers be overcome to ensure the quality of online education?

Interestingly, these questions are valid for lecture-based classrooms as well, yet take on added importance in the online computer-mediated environment.

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