

Quality 'Likes' Integrity in Online Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide international and USA academic faculty and administrators with a glimpse of some of the success factors that ensure online programs are actually being implemented with quality standards throughout the online learning experiences for students.

Quality in education is not a new paradigm; in the late 1990s quality was characterized by those in higher education as being rife with fads and inappropriate attempts to impose corporate management paradigms on higher education. Birnbaum [2] stated: "Quality management fads may have important latent functions in cuing attention, promoting action, and increasing the variety necessary for organizational evolution". To close the gap between teaching styles, academic freedom, technology connected with student styles and other pedagogy is the need for best practices in online education. Best practices can help to assure the reliability in the originality of students' work in today's information availability exchange.

This paper offers academe a framework of four basic postulates to be utilized in online courses for providing an integrated solution for quality, assessment, reliability, and validity in online education. University administrators, faculty, students, and other stakeholders must find more innovative ways to assure quality 'likes' integrity throughout the learning process. Reliability and validity are critical components in any assessment that lends credibility to the inferences drawn [20]. Using active participation through video assignments, video discussions, audio messaging, motivational exercises, cited work in APA/MLA format, and other techniques will help mitigate the problems inherently found in online course instruction. Other topics include organizational changes within institutions for pedagogical consistency in course delivery, quality control checks for reliability in the originality of students' work, and innovative learning benchmarks to encourage active participation.

Most important are the value attributes of integrity that differentiate colleges and universities from each other in the quality domain. Interwoven in many of these attributes are: inspiring more responsible faculty, motivating students in an online learning environment with technology, accountability in delivery, consistency of quality from course to course, and developing a mental mindset at institutions that align quality, integrity, and assessment to the future of online education.

1. Introduction

Quality initiatives in higher education are forcing institutions to strategically rethink areas of accessibility, lower tuition costs, lower textbook costs, and other digital delivery formats to meet the changing world in education. Many stakeholders are asking administrators for measurable outcomes that align the college's and university's value propositions with real returns from investments dollars. These questions from stakeholders mirror events in the UK and France where fierce debates about tuition and access are ongoing. Astin, Keup, and Lindholm [1] argued that higher education has had a negligible effect on the general knowledge, writing ability, and career path of students. Marchese [13] concluded, "What we have is a system for undergraduate education that, in spite of considerable resources, ideas, and effort focused on reform has failed to substantially improve in 30 years". Statistical data from various sources have university completion rates slipping with low student outcomes of improved skills for the basic functions in the workplace. Hence, more and more schools are imposing standardized tests of college outcomes, self-study assessments, and improvement initiatives. The U.S. Secretary of Education has urged universities to get more involved in helping to improve underperforming schools, by forming partnerships with local school districts, establishing charter schools, and improving teacher education [15].

This paper proposes a framework of four basic postulates to be utilized in online courses for providing an integrated solution for quality, assessment, reliability, and validity in online education.

2. Quality in online education

Crosby [4] defines quality management as being “responsible for establishing the purpose of an operation, determining measurable objectives, and taking actions necessary to accomplish those objectives”. Other contemporary quality theorists aligned to the process improvement thinking articulated by Deming (5), Garvin [7], Juran [10], Ishikawa [9], and Taguchi [16]. The growth rates of online learning has transformed many institutions and businesses into profit machines with student enrollments, learning platform systems, course design consultants, and the new trend toward cloud-based mobile support tools. Additional trends are following the “buzz-word” big data with the use of data and analytics for adaptive learning to improving individual student achievement. As universities and businesses alike implement updated strategies they are redefining venue and pedagogy. Consequently, they must also redefine measures of quality [21].

Some questions that can be raised regarding quality in online education:

- *Are quality-control checks being used in the assessment of student learning?*
- *Are instructors actually monitoring quality in online learning?*

As the tenets of quality might suggest, it is the customer (students) that defines the quality of the online class through their experiences found in the course. Bonvillian and Dennis [3] identify the student’s experiences, the political environment, and market forces as being immutable parts of the elusive definition of quality in higher education. Administrators find themselves in situations where defining quality involves “problems of coordination that require calculations of incredible delicacy made in relation to numerous (and sometimes potentially conflicting) institutional goals and obligations” [6]. Unfortunately quality in online education does have an associated cost. For example, employers are not accepting high school diplomas issued by online private high schools [11]. There is still ample opportunity for private online schools to penetrate a market segment for dropouts requiring a diploma to get a job or those incarcerated seeking to re-enter society after serving a prison sentence. There are areas of incorporating quality-checks in the online environment with the learning management system (LMS), and inspections by faculty throughout the course. For example, traditional classroom exam proctors are being replaced by virtual proctors with Webcam surveillance technology [8]. Technology has influenced changes in education with the millennial generation already well versed in the early stages of the digital devices and apps, as well as being social media savvy. The emergence of private institutions of higher education, no matter how dubious, is also introducing increased competitive pressures in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe [12], [17].

2.1 Click on the ‘Like’ button on Facebook™ for quality being liked with integrity

Quality in education is not a new paradigm; in the late 1990s quality was characterized by those in higher education as being rife with fads and inappropriate attempts to impose corporate management paradigms on higher education. Birnbaum [2] stated: “Quality management fads may have important latent functions in cuing attention, promoting action, and increasing the variety necessary for organizational evolution”. To close the gap between teaching styles, student learning styles which incorporate technology, academic freedom, and other pedagogy, a transformation will be needed in online education toward more best practices. Best practices can help to assure the reliability in the originality of students’ work in today’s information availability exchange. Reliability and validity are critical components in any assessment that lends credibility to the inferences drawn [20]. As stated, Wang [19] acknowledged the rapid pace of change in online education has created a work in progress for *Best Practices*. Exemplar models are necessary to demonstrate real improvement in process and results [12][14]. Leading the best practice of utilizing standardized tests in the U.S. are Pennsylvania State University’s World Campus, the State University of New York’s Empire State College, University of Maryland University College, Western Governors University, Excelsior College in Albany New York, and Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey [19]. In the U.S., the benchmarks for measuring educational quality have traditionally been provided by accreditation bodies [17]. In order to close the gap in academe a framework of four



basic postulates is presented in table 1.0 for process-checks tailored to focus on the quality processes in online courses. It is the author's intent that such a framework that incorporates the dimensions of quality, assessment, reliability, and validity will begin to peel back layers of the onion and look inside the core (metaphorically) to determine what is really happening in online education. Perhaps when all stakeholders are able to click on the 'Like' buttons on Facebook (for quality being liked with integrity for online education) then the social acceptance will equate to quality assurance (QA) for online courses and programs.

3. Framework for Process Improvement

Table 1

Process-checks by faculty or online managers assigned to the course	Results of process improvement
<p>1. Quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pre-class checks Determine the background and interests of the students by providing a student information sheet to be completed via an online survey tool. Extract key indicators from data to obtain group formations, assignments and exercises that could be tailored toward areas of interest and other key performance indicators. -In-class checks Monitor the students through online utilization times (logins), assignments completed, and active participation (e.g. discussions). <p>2. Assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - External Use of external exams, certifications, industry surveys, third party evaluations. - Internal assessments An online manager or group of faculty tasked to evaluate the active participation, feedback to students, grading, and content knowledge. Develop performance outcomes for faculty and students. <p>3. Reliability and 4. Validity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - All written assignments must be filtered through a plagiarism tool as well as a secondary search engine. Idiosyncrasies of plagiarism tools can be unreliable under certain conditions (e.g. using special text, paraphrasing, etc.). - Use of voice and video activation student ID files, eye-retina scans and other technology coding to validate the 	<p>Know your customers (students). Develop a database for faculty to design course content based on the needs of the students. Align results with an industry board for the workplace. Reduce students' deficiencies by determining at the start of the course areas of weakness (e.g. first online class, not good in statistics, learning disability, writing skills, etc.)</p> <p>Know your customers (students). Be able to delineate users of the online system. Results might reduce the class size when an automatic withdrawal is setup in the learning management system (LMS).</p> <p>Know what your customers (students) know. By incorporating a process methodology that goes above and beyond 5 or 10 year accreditation body review. Use the performance outcomes for faculty to improvement faculty development. Use performance outcomes for students to improve curriculum, admission requirements, retention, and image of the school.</p> <p>Know who your customers (students) are across all online courses. Be able to identify the student taking an online exam, uploading an assignment, or other work. Improve organizational changes within institutions for pedagogical consistency in course delivery, quality control checks for reliability in the originality of students' work, and innovative learning with the use of benchmarks to provide faculty with a 'best in class' framework from top online institutions.</p>



assignments.

- Student course experiences must be consistent in course content and delivery across different instructors. For example, using active participation through video assignments, video discussions, audio messaging, motivational exercises, cited work in APA/MLA format, and other techniques will help mitigate the problems.

Note:

This proposed framework was developed by the author's own practical experiences as a QA process engineer, and experiences in education. The framework designates the faculty or online manager(s) as the gatekeepers for process-checks throughout the online course.

Such a framework might outrage faculty as a quality inspector or gatekeeper of integrity, hence, such a role can be extended to an online manager that oversees the QA functions as defined in table 1.0.

4. Conclusion

University administrators, faculty, students, and other stakeholders must find new innovative ways to assure quality 'likes' integrity throughout the learning process. The first step is incorporating a QA process for online education that drives a culture of shared best practices in the education industry.

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