Chapter 6

Massive Open Program Evaluation: Crowdsourcing’s Potential to Improve E–Learning Quality

Tonya B. Amankwatia
Regent University, USA

ABSTRACT

Given the complexity of developing programs, services, policies, and support for e-learning, leaders may find it challenging to regularly evaluate programs to improve quality. Are there new opportunities to expand user and stakeholder input, or involve others in e-learning program evaluation? This chapter asks researchers and practitioners to rethink existing paradigms and methods for program evaluation. Crowdsourced input may help leaders and stakeholders address persistent evaluation challenges and improve e-learning quality, especially in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). After reviewing selected evaluation paradigms, models, and methods, this chapter offers a possible role for crowdsourced input. This chapter examines the topics of crowd definition, affordances, and problems, to begin a taxonomical framework with possible applications for e-learning. The goal is to provide a reference for advancing the discussion and examination of crowdsourced input.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning programs vary. Many can be described as accelerated, flexible, global, and open (Crawford, 2012; Moore, 2013; Trekles & Sims, 2013). E-learning can also be characterized by its different pedagogical strategies—such as student-centered, socially-negotiated, or authentic learning—that sometimes involve gaming, personal profiles, and e-portfolios (Casey, 2008; Ke & Kwak, 2013). The extent to which e-learning programs implement these strategies effectively, or to which they align to complementary materials, support, and learner outcomes, is partly a question of program quality. When e-learning programs include repackaged massive open online courses (MOOCs), additional questions arise about intellectual property, credentials, and elements of learning (Haber, 2014). Put simply, people want answers about quality.

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Some education stakeholders are dubious about the quality of e-learning programs and their impact on learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Garrison, 2011; Millirion, 2010). Taxpayers, parents, policymakers, employers, educators, and—in some cases—even learners want answers. Does e-learning make a difference in teaching and learning? Is the technology worth the effort and cost?

The purpose of program evaluation is to provide answers for decision-makers and stakeholders. Evaluation studies should show that administrators, educators, and designers have examined e-learning’s various forms, grappled with its complex issues, and utilized representative data to undergird their decisions and designs (Barksdale & Lund, 2001; Preskill & Russ-Eft, 2005). Moreover, program evaluation experts have contended that evaluation can be a viable means for educational change and improvement when integrated as an ongoing activity, rather than as an isolated event (Patton, 2008, 2001; Shelton, 2011). Nonetheless, given the complexity of developing programs, services, policies, and support for e-learning, leaders might find it challenging to evaluate programs, make decisions, and solve problems to improve quality.

Furthermore, some historical challenges remain for e-learning program evaluation and qualitative research. For example, the time and resources required to collect, analyze, and apply evaluation data can be problematic. Also, it can be challenging to implement qualitative research paradigms and methods that aspire to extend localized findings to contexts beyond that of the evaluation, to involve stakeholders early in program design, or to use negotiation and collaboration strategies to reach consensus about evaluation methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Reeves & Hedberg, 2008). Finally, defining **quality** programs is a challenge, especially when several models exist for partial and holistic e-learning evaluation (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). However, some key technological advances potentially address the complexities and challenges of e-learning program evaluation.

Buoyed by diverse networked communities, anti-cheating mechanisms, information retrieval systems (IR), and big data analytics, crowdsourcing might hold promise for program evaluation beyond market research and bug fixes (Amir & Haider, 2014; Vuurens & de Vries, 2012). Crowdsourced input could potentially make the e-learning evaluation process more open, integrated, and innovative, and thereby provide timely and useful data to answer questions about e-learning programs. To frame the discussion of the potential of crowdsourced input, this chapter identifies and reviews well-established evaluation paradigms and models suitable to crowdsourcing. Next it defines crowdsourcing and reports its affordances and limitations. Finally, this chapter proposes a taxonomy and then models its potential application to program evaluation using Khan’s Eight Dimensions of E-learning Framework (2001). The chapter concludes by emphasizing opportunities to rethink stakeholders’ and others’ participation in e-learning program evaluation.

**PROMISES AND CHALLENGES OF PROGRAM EVALUATION**

Reeves and Hedberg (2008) maintained that e-learning has promise but lacks results, mostly due to inadequate evaluation from design to implementation. However, a similar critique might be launched at program evaluation. To move closer to the goal of this chapter, this section will review program evaluation literature, highlighting salient definitions, paradigms, and models noted for involving stakeholders in ongoing and meaningful ways to inform program quality, impact, or design. This review thus focuses on qualitative research, along with **interpretivist** and **postmodernist** paradigms and models, delineating their promises and challenges.
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