Chapter 8

Structuring Online Instruction by Dynamic Design, Delivery, and Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Over 900 colleges and universities across the U.S. have adopted the Quality Matters Rubric for the design of their online courses with the intention of providing guidance to both instructors and peer reviewers. Given the challenge of how design components align with Web-based instruction delivery in terms of interactivity and formative assessment, there is a need to develop guidelines to establish a strong connection between design and delivery. Such information could support a dynamic, balanced, and student-centered approach to instructional development in virtual learning environments. This chapter proposes a matrix built on the linkage among well-established design practices, delivery methods or strategies, and assessment routines.

INTRODUCITON

A number of quality assurance programs for online courses have been developed over the years. Most widely adopted is the Quality Matters™ (QM) Rubric Standards used by over 900 colleges and universities to ensure student success in online learning (Quality Matters, 2015). Not only do the QM standards help faculty in their design of online courses, but they also emphasize continuous improvement and consistency in the quality of online learning in individual courses and at institutional levels.

The most recent iteration of the QM Rubric identifies eight general standards for designing online courses along the following criteria: course overview and introduction, learning objectives, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, course activities and learner interaction, course technology, learner support, accessibility and usability. These critical areas of interest are supported by 41 Specific
Review Standards, 21 of which are considered essential, meaning that not meeting any of them in this latter set would result in a course not being QM certified. The QM Rubric (2015) emphasizes the alignment of course materials, activities, and course objectives. The associated standards prompt online faculty, instructional designers, and institutions at large to refine the design of their course/program offerings for virtual delivery by using a complex peer review system. Research reviewed by Woods (2014) indicates that applying the QM review process results in greater student learning outcomes that rely on stronger, clearer connections to course objectives as well as assessment tools. Similar positive results have been reported by other researchers who completed recent studies (Little as well as Puzziferro & Shelton, as cited in Roehrs, Wang, & Kendrick, 2013, p. 55). As an illustration, faculty participating in a research project focused on QM rubric training based on which to review and update their respective courses expressed the fact that the process was useful to them as it prompted these participants to enhance the learning experiences of their online students (Roehrs, Wang, & Kendrick, 2013).

In this chapter, the authors propose a matrix - Dynamic Design, Delivery and Assessment (3DA) - built on the connection among well-established design practices (as guided by QM processes), delivery methods or strategies, and assessment routines (see Table 1 below). The number of students taking online courses has been growing continuously, reaching over 7 million in 2012, based on enrollment in at least one Web-based class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Consequently, the shift from a focus on developing the infrastructure to ensuring effectiveness (McKnight, 2004). The inherent paradigm change from quantity to quality (Liu & Johnson, 2004) implies bridging the apparent gap between design and delivery of online instruction (Southard & Mooney, 2015). Under these circumstances, the proposed theoretical matrix correlates in a bidirectional manner the aforementioned elements by grounding them in teacher presence as well as student social and cognitive presence, as outlined by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). This matrix can be used by instructors who plan to design online courses or improve their teaching by making the theoretical and practical connections between design, delivery and assessment.

BACKGROUND

Designing an online course needs to be based on a systems approach that considers all aspects of online instruction. Faculty who teach online or plan to teach online can benefit from a dynamic, balanced and student-centered approach to design, delivery, and assessment of instruction. As online course effectiveness depends greatly on instructional design (Gunawardena, Ortegano-Layne, Carabajal, Frechette, Lindemann, & Jennings, 2006; McGahan, Jackson, & Premer, 2015), rubrics or standards, such as QM or iNACOL as well as faculty professional development programs, can be supported by this systematic approach to teaching online.

The QM program features rigorous training for faculty interested in teaching online by relying on a peer-review system for the purpose of improving the quality of virtual learning environments design. The peer review process and built-in feedback loop represent critical components of the continuous improvement cycle supported by QM (Schwegler & Altman, 2015). As faculty-driven process connecting outcomes, objectives, and assessments (Swan, Day, Bogle, & Matthews, 2014), the fifth edition of the QM Rubric consists of 43 specific review standards that are distributed across the eight general standards mentioned earlier. There are “21 “Essential” standards worth three points each, 14 “Very Important”
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