Chapter II

Defining Online Assessment for the Adult Learning Market

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Abstract

Learning for many adult professionals culminates in some form of assessment. Doctors, cosmetologists, private detectives, insurance agents, real estate brokers, plumbers, contractors, electricians, nurses, roofers, dietitians, and many others are trained in a variety of programs from community colleges to graduate programs, and increasingly their education and testing is conducted wholly or in part via e-learning platforms. Online assessment provides educators with the ability to measure learning needs, assess the results of learning activity, and speed learners toward professional credentialing by leveraging the efficient delivery framework of the Internet. In this chapter, we describe several low- to high-stakes online test delivery methods, which, when coupled with e-learning systems, can offer education providers with valuable opportunities for enriching the validity and credibility of their programs. We discuss the relationship of online assessment...
models in the context of e-learning, as well as distinguish between the types of testing technologies used to deliver them. We conclude by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of offering assessments online and the future of online assessment systems in general.

**Introduction**

E-learning is a form of technology-enabled instruction designed to increase learners’ knowledge and skills so they can be more productive, find and keep high-quality jobs, advance in their careers and have a positive impact on their employers’, families’ and communities’ success. E-learning takes place online—via the Internet or through some form of courseware—and typically offers users a variety of content presentation modes as well as resources for retrieving class materials, researching subject-related information, and facilitating peer-to-peer interactions. Without requiring an instructor to be physically present, e-learning has been viewed as revolutionary because it explodes the concept of a personalized instructor-to-student relationship and allows the education process to be individualized rather than institution based.

The rising popularity of e-learning has paralleled extraordinary increases in domestic and international Internet access. Over the past 10 years, the number of Internet sites and users has grown from thousands to millions. As of 2004, three out of four Americans have Internet access in the United States. Of Americans living in households with a phone line, 74.9% have home access to the Internet. This amounts to 204 million Americans out of the projected 272 million who are at least two years old (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2004). Placed in historical context against other media forms, the Internet has become as pervasive as radio or television, in a fraction of the time. The impact of readily available home and work Internet access has been, and will continue to be, a substantial contributor to the availability of e-learning technologies for many people without access to traditional forms of education. According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (2002), although ethnic minority groups in the United States—particularly African Americans—were among the last to use the Internet in the early 1990s, their usage has grown significantly over the last 10 years, and individuals with disabling conditions have also been connecting in growing numbers.

By eliminating mandatory clock-hour attendance in favor of performance and outcome-based measures, and by emphasizing customized learning solutions over generic one-size-fits-all instruction, the self-service potential of e-learning is particularly appealing to these nontraditional learners. Laurillard (1993) stated