E-Learning Quality: A Look Towards The Demands of its Good Practices

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evaluation issue has acquired a significant importance in the last years and has increased the concern about the analysis of the educational practices' quality. This article deals with the concept of quality and asks about the different aspects that define it. It develops certain criteria that allow assessing a good e-learning practice. The first aspects that are necessary to define are: (a) the pursued purpose and (b) the Institution’s structural configuration. Good practice evidences are: a direct relation between the program proposal and the intervention context; coherence between theory and practice; presence of interactive and multimedia materials together with permanent interaction; strategies and devices especially designed to support learning; appropriate technology; permanent evaluating research; and a clear human resources policy.

Keywords: distance learning; e-learning; evaluation; online course; required course

INTRODUCTION

The far-reaching importance that the issue of evaluation has acquired in the last years has not only impregnated our discourses with its vocabulary but also has increased the interest in the analysis of the quality of the educational practices.

Evaluation and quality are two issues always related. In general, when we evaluate, we do it with reference to a model we consider ideal, desirable, and representative of our idea of quality. That conception of quality is what will orientate and will base our judgements of value in relation to the evaluated practice. Here lays the significance of a previous definition of the concept of quality, since this is a polysemous and multidimensional concept, it requires previous considerations that consider the ideological differences, the diverse meanings, and the multiple aspects that are entangled at the moment of defining its meaning, components, and characteristics.

Every day we hear about many of the uses of this concept that range from the simple instrumental reason to the most utopian conceptions. Therefore, we find quality criteria defined from an organizational reality that considers the institution to be responsible for the action immersed in a structure of power that result questionable to us. In addition, the receptor of that action is considered from a passive perspective, “as a receptacle of a service or product” where quality exists independently from the participant subjects, unconnected with the collective experience (CINDA, 1990).
Other models aimed at the people’s quality of life improvement, based on respect toward diversity and on a renouncement to transform individuals into instruments (Nirenberg, Brawerman, & Ruiz, 2000), are opposed to that economic rationality mentioned before.

Brunner (1994) affirms that there are those who assess superior education quality from the input, the products, and the processes’ point of view. Consequently, they elaborate criteria, standards, or measures for its amelioration, completely opposite to them, and often contradictory.

Thus, if the importance of the input is emphasized to determine the quality of an institution or educative programme, the stress will be set in the expenses per student, in the availability of technological equipment, in the technical and academic qualification of the hired equipment, in the bibliographic resources, etc.

On the contrary, if the results are the main concern, the products linked with teaching, research, or production especially highlighting the good chances of job placement for graduates, the number of papers produced by their researchers, the awards received, etc., will be watched predominantly.

This third dimension in Brunner’s classification is constituted by the emphasis on the processes, underlining all the aspects referring to organization and administration of the different stages of development of the educational programmes. This is a way of appreciating the selected methods, the designed procedures, the learning environment built, the communication upheld, the promoted interaction and interactivity, etc.

It is completely possible to recognize these frames of assessment in the presentation of some institutions and/or e-learning programmes, especially in the corporate field, which marketing campaigns reflect visions based either on the important input that fed the proposals with the often millionaire budgets, or on results obtained from some important bidding. In all the cases, the institutional home page is an eloquent witness of these framings.

On the other hand, other organizations relate the concept of quality with innovation, considering the search for change and the institutional dynamism an evidence of concern towards quality. “The improvement of quality is deeply linked with the permanent innovation both in the academic field and in management processes” (ANUIES, 2001).

Many other classifications can be considered at the time of setting the concept of quality. This fact is what makes it impossible to establish an aseptic definition. What we could do instead is to establish our theoretical position facing the need to assess the quality of a virtual education experience.

With this purpose, I prefer to withdraw from the criteria and/or indicators listings, which supposedly allow an “objective” analysis of the virtual programmes or proposals. On the other hand, I will focus on the search for quality “evidences” found in technologically mediatised educative practices. For that reason, we will develop the concept of “good practice.”

We constantly notice that some concepts or expressions enter our work field, our practices, and vocabulary without a previous analysis of their meaning. This is the case of the good practices.

In fact, we were used to talking about “good teaching” in Fenstermacher’s (1986) philosophical sense, in other words, the conscious activity of teaching rationally justifiable contents. In short, issues worth knowing, believing, and understanding for the student.

In a wider sense, we talk about good education when we find in the educational proposal updated and relevant contents, good teaching staff, methodologies, and resources that adequately accompany student’s learning in a permanent interaction context.

Biggs (2003) states that good teaching is achieved “when the majority of the students use the superior cognitive levels processes, which spontaneously use the more academic ones.” The teachers will be responsible for the design of adequate strategies to succeed it.
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