E-Learning Quality
Relations and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Although e-Learning activities have quickly increased, such a rise has not been parallel in e-Learning quality. While reinforcing some aspects can be very positive, certain deficiencies can lower the quality in e-Learning. Crucial factors such as the institutional policy, the quality of contents, the quality of processes, the results and possible improvements may remain hardly noticeable or may be pushed into the background. Sometimes the effort invested does not amount to any educational result. Perhaps in the future some kind of universally accepted rules to measure e-Learning quality may be reached, but in the history of educational technology there have been few global regulations and much more of flexible guidance. In the last few years several promising e-Learning quality recommendations have appeared. Some relations among the variables of e-Learning quality have been detected. This paper focuses upon this ongoing research which is represented by means of five conceptual maps that ease the visualization of these relations. Additionally a survey about e-Learning quality has been carried out with university students with a view to revealing those variables that are most important for them.

Keywords: Benchmarks, Conceptual Maps, Education Quality, e-Learning Processes, e-Learning Quality

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the quantity of e-Learning activities has increased. However, the effectiveness and suitable quality of e-Learning in education remains a hotly-debated issue. Crucial factors such as the institutional policy, the quality of contents, the quality of processes, the results and possible improvements can be unnoticed or fail to be visible enough. Instead prevailing criteria are the quantity of contents and the quickness of those being developed. As Phipps and Merisotis (2000) wrote, “Proponents ooze with blind adoration, declaring that online learning can solve all the problems confronting traditional education. Opponents insist that courses taught on the net are incapable of living up to the standards of the traditional bricks and mortar classroom” (p. vii).

This extraordinary growth of Internet based-learning has led certain organizations to develop guidelines often composed of benchmarks that measure different aspects of e-Learning quality (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000). Frequently, they offer recommendations and reflections of good e-Learning practices. Currently, there is little consensus about which is the best scale. Perhaps some universally accepted
rules to measure e-Learning quality may be proposed in the near future, but in the history of educational technology there have been few global imperatives.

In the last century, educational technology began to be infused in the traditional classroom and numerous instructional designs to enhance learning started to develop (Bloom, Ausubel, Merrill, etc.). Now, in the twenty-first century, a movement toward more effective e-Learning has been launched.

Due to a lack of international consensus regarding e-Learning and its supporting technologies, comparisons are difficult. In general, it is accepted that e-Learning pedagogies are probabilistic (Reigeluth, 1999). There are no infallible methods and each new guideline about quality attempts to contribute to better e-Learning outcomes, with little or no guarantees.

Lindquist warns about the need for harmonization with respect to quality perspectives. He states that Europe is filled with “Islands of Quality Initiatives”, but he acknowledges that there are no bridges. Many of the initiatives are predominantly supplier-oriented instead of user-oriented. As a result, quality standards include an extensive set of questions, but only a few answers with even fewer final recommendations based on the total-scores (Lindquist, 2004). Many specifications are not taking into consideration the real actors of education (i.e., students and teachers), but rather focus only upon the commercial business.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England strategy for e-Learning (2006) specifically mentions the importance of benchmarking the present state of e-Learning in the sector, in order to measure progress towards the goal of embedding technology into teaching practice.

According to Lewis (President of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, in a speech offered in Spain in 2006), every effort made in order to obtain a positive certification must become a real evaluation of the learning outcomes. In fact, the American Distance Education Consortium (2003) has stressed that learning experience must have a clear purpose with tightly focused outcomes and objectives as the first principle. The same idea is pointed by Ehlers (2005) when they argue, “as regards what respondents understand by quality in e-Learning, the predominant view is that quality relates to obtaining the best learning achievements (50%). Together with ‘something that is excellent in performance’ (19%), this primarily pedagogical understanding was more widespread than options related to best value for money or marketing” (p. 8). Barker (1999) states that “all learning products and services are a combination or system of inputs and resources, processes and practices, and outputs and outcomes. All are important; however, from the consumer’s point of view, the outcomes are the most important, then processes and practices, and finally inputs and resources...” (p. 3).

With this in mind, higher education institutions providing distance education are quickly adapting these rules so as to become more realistic in their aims especially when it comes to e-Learning. The previous experience proves that a strict discipline or didactic normalization cannot fit into a particular context and has many possibilities of not being observed. A set of open recommendations can be better adapted or modulated to address particular circumstances. Such disparities help explain why, at this moment, individual countries, institutions, and even faculties are choosing different models. With regard to the existing frameworks, we can try to organize this burst of approaches, by building some conceptual maps from a wide perspective.

Some E-Learning Quality Frameworks

The characteristics of the documents that address e-Learning analyzed here are significantly different from others trying to measure the quality in traditional face-to-face contexts. Indicators such as students/teacher ratio, stability of staff, students’ grades, credit costs, etc. are not taken into consideration in these frameworks. Instead, this paper will concentrate its analysis upon specific e-Learning variables.
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