Effective Course, Faculty, and Program Evaluation

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The Changing Nature of Evaluation

Given that delivering education online is changing the landscape of learning, bringing with it approaches and techniques that are not necessarily used in the face-to-face classroom, doesn’t it make sense that the ways in which we assess student learning and evaluate courses and faculty should change as well? It behooves instructors and other assessors to become knowledgeable about best practices in assessment online as well as ways in which to develop standards and benchmarks based on both the content of a given course and the professional context in which that content resides. Not only does this create a positive context for assessment, it also creates a sense of relevance to real world practice. The same is true with the evaluation of online courses and programs – what are the best practices in course and program evaluation, since online courses represent a different form of educational delivery? How do those practices align with what is demanded in the fields to which the courses and programs relate? We contend that there needs to be strong links when evaluating courses, faculty, and online programs between assessments of student performance at the course outcome level to the competencies developed for the online program of study and also with the mission of the university to create alignment between them all. This paper will look at best practices in online course, faculty, and program evaluation based on these principles.

Online Course Evaluation

Roberts, Irani, Telg, and Lundy (2005) noted that most courses in higher education institutions are evaluated by surveying student attitudes and reactions toward the course at its conclusion. With online courses, additional questions might be asked regarding the technology in use and the instructional strategies employed to promote interaction between the student and instructor. They noted the need to create evaluation instruments that respond to the ways in which instruction occurs online.

Brookfield (1995) stated that traditional course evaluations rarely measure what we want them to measure. He describes course evaluations as a popularity contest since they generally ask students to rate how much they liked or disliked the instructor.

In the learner-focused online classroom, however, course evaluations should not focus on whether or not the student liked the instructor, but whether the course provided an opportunity for learning. Angelo and Cross (1993) suggested that instructors ask themselves three questions when evaluating their own courses: What are the essential skills and knowledge I am trying to teach? How can I find out whether students are learning them? How can I help students learn better? Responses to these questions point directly to the outcomes developed for the course and look at how successful the course activities were in helping students master them.

When the focus is on formative as well as summative evaluation, instructors can receive ongoing answers to these questions as the course is in session and can adjust as necessary to ensure outcome achievement rather than finding out at the end that activities were not as successful as hoped. Given, however, that
most institutions require some form of summative course evaluation at the conclusion of the term, it is important to create an evaluation that reflects the interactive, more self-directed and learner-focused nature of online learning. Arbaugh (2000) suggested that there are four general categories of factors that influence online learning and should be incorporated into evaluation of online courses. They are:

- Perceived usefulness and ease of the course,
- Flexibility for students and instructors,
- Ease of and emphasis on interaction, and
- Experiences with engagement.

The following is a sample course evaluation we have constructed specifically for online courses that takes these elements into account:

Course Evaluation

Your feedback is important to us! Thank you for completing this survey!

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The course is well organized</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Course readings are relevant to course objectives</td>
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<td>3. Course assignments are relevant to course objectives</td>
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<td>4. In this course, different instructional approaches are used.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Please rate the elements below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Applicable</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Above Average</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Quality of online feedback by colleagues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Quality of interaction with instructor(s)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>7. Quality of instructor responsiveness</td>
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</table>

8. Do you have any additional comments on Items 2 through 7?

9. How did the course add value to your professional and/or personal learning goals?

10. What most helped me to take responsibility for my learning in this class was:

11. What most prevented me from taking responsibility for my learning in this class was:

12. The area of my development as a learner that I most need to work on as a result of taking this class is:
Faculty Evaluation

As institutions implement online distance learning programs, they are faced with two important tasks – training and development for online instructors and effective means by which to evaluate their performance. As already noted, asking students to reflect on instructor performance is only one source of evaluative material and should not be the sole element on which instructor evaluation is based. Given the number of factors influencing student satisfaction with a course – the technology in use, ease of access to materials, the ability to interact easily with peers as well as the instructor, etc – simply asking students how well the instructor performed or whether the instructor was present and provided help on course activities does not provide an adequate basis for evaluation. Williams (2003) suggests that significant research needs to be conducted on instructor roles and competencies so as to adequately train and evaluate online instructors. Once that training has occurred, then faculty evaluation can be geared to how well the individual faculty member has mastered those roles and competencies and what training is still needed. Generally speaking, course design and facilitation skills are the two top competencies needed for online instructors. In our own experience of training online instructors through our Teaching in the Virtual Classroom Program, we have found that online instructors believe that instructional design and course facilitation skills are the most important to successful course delivery. It is important to remember, however, that many instructors do not write or design the courses they teach. Clearly in these cases, the focus of evaluation needs to be on course delivery and facilitation for successful learning outcomes.

Another concern regarding faculty evaluation is who conducts the review. Tobin (2004) points out that many administrators who are called upon to evaluate online instructors have never taught online themselves. Consequently, the evaluation tends to be based on criteria that apply to traditional face-to-face delivery and tends to evaluate the wrong things when it comes to teaching online. The use of mentoring, peer reviews, and portfolios can help to reduce this concern if not eliminate it. A mentoring/peer review approach would begin with training for all instructors followed by the assignment of a mentor, who is generally a more experienced online faculty member, who shadows the first course or courses taught by the new online instructor and provides ongoing formative evaluation of the teaching approach. Institutions using this method do not often include peer reviews as part of administrative review of the instructor, but rather as part of ongoing faculty development, except in the case where performance is being questioned. Once a cadre of experienced online instructors has been developed in this way, ongoing peer review of courses becomes an easier and more relevant task. The goal becomes continuous quality improvement of courses and effectiveness of facilitation rather than “monitoring” faculty performance. The results of these peer reviews can be incorporated into a faculty portfolio, which then becomes part of a more complete picture of faculty performance.

(Source: Palloff & Pratt, 2008)
Program Evaluation

Just as with course and faculty evaluation, program evaluation should be outcome and competency based. Competency-mapping is an important technique to accomplish this task. In a larger competency-mapping project, the goal is to graphically illustrate how the competencies developed for the program are addressed in every course in the program. The development of competencies is accomplished through a consensus-building process wherein numerous mechanisms are tapped for input. These can include:

- Faculty input
- Student surveys
- Standardized tests
- Employer surveys
- Required professional competencies for practice
- Alumni surveys
- Student assessments and analysis of final projects required for the program
- Portfolio analyses
- Job placement tracking

Once the competencies are agreed-upon and established, then a process to evaluate how well they are being accomplished is put in place. Often, the mechanism used is a final integrative project, thesis, or capstone course that involves the demonstrated application of the competencies. The results can then be analyzed to determine areas of the curriculum that are working well, need improvement, or might be missing. The process, then, is as follows:

- Establish competencies that address desired goals of the program and are responsive to the marketplace into which students will eventually be hired.
- Develop a set of competency-curriculum maps that link each competency to a course or course unit.
- Develop feedback mechanisms designed to measure the achievement of outcomes.
- Analyze the results of the feedback mechanisms to identify areas of the curriculum in need of attention.
- Modify the curriculum in the areas of need.
- Begin the cycle again.

The use of this process helps to ensure that regular program reviews occur, keeps the focus on outcomes and competency development, and keeps the process learner-focused. Learner-focused instruction begs for learner-focused assessment and evaluation. Keeping the learner as the center of attention creates a comprehensive means by which courses and programs can be evaluated on an ongoing basis and helps to align assessment activities within courses to faculty evaluation to course evaluation and finally to program evaluation. As Dunn, Morgan, O’Reilly, and Parry (2004) note, the development of competencies, outcomes, objectives, and assessments begins with the organizational mission and asks the questions, “What do we want our graduates to be when they leave us? What do we want them to represent?” These questions should guide any of the assessment and evaluation processes in which we engage.
References


Torbin, T. (2004), Best practices for administrative evaluation of online faculty, *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 7*(2), State University of West Georgia Distance Education Center. Retrieved from [http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer72/tobin72.html].


About the Presenters

**Rena Palloff** and **Keith Pratt** are the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group. Rena and Keith are program directors and faculty in the Teaching in the Virtual Classroom program at Fielding Graduate University. They are the authors of the 1999 Frandson Award winning book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), *The Virtual Student* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), *Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community* (Jossey-Bass, 2005), and *Assessing the Online Learner* (2008 – in publication). The second edition of *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, now titled, *Building Online Learning Communities* was published in July 2007. The books are comprehensive guides to the development of an online environment that helps promote successful learning outcomes while fostering collaboration and building a sense of community among the learners. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994 as well as consulting to academic institutions regarding the development of effective distance learning programs. They have presented at the Distance Learning Conference annually since 1999.

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