Edu-Effectiveness and Distance Education: How to Measure Success in the Online Classroom

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Abstract: How we determine the quality of online education in the classroom is of primary concern for all institutions and organizations providing continuing education via new technologies. Recent statistics from the National Center for Educational Statistics reveals that enrollment in distance learning courses roughly doubled in two years from 754,000 to 1.6 million. With heightened enrollments come heightened expectations from adult learners that the quality of their online instruction will be (at minimum) equivalent to that which they can obtain in traditional learning environments. Despite the lack of national standards (at present) for delivering online educational courses, there are effective (and peer-reviewed) strategies that online faculty can use to measure and ensure an effective online classroom experience for the learner. This session will explain those strategies, and provide models for other faculty to use in their online classroom experiences.

Introduction

How we determine the quality of online learning, which translates into success in the online classroom is at the heart of this research report. As more individuals turn to online education as a means of maintaining continuing education requirements for certification, as well as look for convenience without the sacrifice of quality in learning, the standard for online education providers will become a significant goal to achieve and use in online course development.

This project proposes to use previous research which measured the impact of critical incidents in the online classroom as a standard for identifying barriers to excellence and effectiveness in the online classroom, and for use in creating models of online learning excellence for institutions.

The Study

For this research, we are choosing to focus on measuring effectiveness in the facilitated online classroom of adult learners who are taking courses offered by associations and professional membership groups online. The measure of effectiveness was further defined as determined by faculty members facilitating the course and by students taking the courses, as: having completed the course from start to finish; having felt as if new knowledge was gained, which would be advantageous professionally (student perspective); having felt as if the learning was immediately applicable to current professional work or professional growth (student perspective). (Note: The learners, in this instance, do not necessarily receive “grades” as in a traditional academic course. Many individuals, depending on the industry in which they work, are required to take continuing education courses to maintain professional certification, and these courses do not necessarily return “grades,” but proof of attendance or a record of completion for the learner having finished the course.)

The actual measure of effectiveness is being determined by: course participant persistence; number of completed assignments by course participants; level and intensity of interactivity between course participants; level and intensity of interactivity between adult learners and faculty members; frequency and amount of feedback among course participants; frequency and amount of feedback between faculty
members and course participants; quality and quantity of written conversation among course members and faculty members; and, success in problem solving or resolution of course difficulties (if any) by course participants and faculty members.

Findings

At present, the findings are inconclusive, because the research is ongoing. However, a overview of current data on the associations reveals the main issues at the heart of determining effectiveness in an online course that includes association member-users tends to focus on consistency, quality, and reliability of regular communication, both in the online classroom and in using alternative communication tools when necessary.

Conclusions

While any conclusion is considered early at this stage of the research, it is hoped that the specific findings from this project result in the development of guidelines and an assessment tool for associations to use in creating viable online education opportunities for their members.

References


Gunawardena, Charlotte N. and Frank J. Zittle. 1997. Social presence as a predictor of satisfaction within a computer-mediated conferencing environment. The American Journal of Distance Education 11, no. 3.