Quality Online Teaching?   Who's asking?

Julie Whittaker
New Zealand Tertiary College

Abstract: In support of international research defining 'quality' in online teaching through the development of benchmarks, standards or guidelines, this paper discusses how five principles that underpin the New Zealand e-Learning guidelines could inform and support institutions and teachers in the development of a quality online curriculum. Emphasis is given to what the five principles could mean for tertiary educators and institutions along with some educational implications for learners.

Introduction

Quality is a major issue in online tertiary teaching. How can it be identified? How can it be provided for and how can it be maintained? These are all questions that many providers of higher education online courses are grappling with today. They see 'quality' as the key to protecting their institutional integrity and clearly differentiating themselves from the 'digital diploma mills', 'web-cowboys' and 'shovelled' programmes that have taken early advantage of the knowledge economy and lightning advances in technology.

The growth of the knowledge economy, creeping globalisation and the speed at which new technologies are developed and adopted, in many countries around the world, are the main forces behind the current trend of online education (Kinshuk, 2003). The very fact that online education implies anytime access, flexibility and a level of learner-control makes some traditionalists sceptical of the quality of the programmes offered (Hope, 2001). This view is verified by Parker (2004) who observes that many academics are unhappy with the business model of higher education which promotes the concept of "learner as consumer/information as commodity" (p. 388). They feel it is not congruent with the academic view of higher education being "independent scholarship in the pursuit of the advancement of learning" (p. 388).

Previously educational quality was deemed to be assured because of the credentialing of an institution's academic staff and the correlation between availability of access and the competence of their entry level learners. However the International Standards Organisation considers the fundamental tenet in the quest for quality to be the establishment of processes that will maximise customer service. If online teaching is contextualised within a business model, learner-centred, framework then perhaps this definition could be rephrased as 'establishment of processes that will maximise customer learning'.

It is clear that trying to define 'quality' can be problematic as it is 'in the eye of the stakeholder'.   Within this context of diverse perspectives, a phenomenography approach is seen by some, such as Ference Marton

(1994), as an appropriate means of studying the myriad of ways in which people "experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, or conceptualize various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around them" (p. 4424). Jones, Asensio and Goodyear (2000) used this approach to examine practitioner perspectives of networked learning in higher education highlighting a common philosophy of online teaching but a lack of guidelines or 'rules of thumb'. Meyer (2003) and Parker (2004) concur with this suggesting that there is little agreement on what 'quality' looks like because it is experientially contextualised for each stakeholder. With a view to the phenomenographical approach, this paper outlines a range of views on the nature of quality in online education programmes and advocates for ongoing collaboration and dialogue regarding indicators of quality.

Although different language is used in the literature to define important aspects of quality in online teaching this paper emphasises that there is agreement regarding general areas where 'online quality' can be effectively evaluated and addressed. This paper will use five principles identified in relation to the New Zealand e-Learning guidelines as categories to frame and promote discussion around some of the complexities inherent in online quality, their relevance to teachers and tertiary institutions, their implications for learners, and their application in keeping debates around quality in online learning open and meaningful.

Benchmarks for quality

In today's world, of globalised, fiercely marketed, lifelong education recognition of a quality programme is not straight forward. Potential online learners need to be able to differentiate between the 'Digital Diploma Mills' (Noble, 1997), 'Web-cowboys' and providers of quality courses that are validated by professional bodies, national governments and employers (Hope, 2001). Online educators and institutions need to be aware that, whilst a paradigm shift in education per se is not necessary to teach online, a definite shift in thinking and knowing about how to provide quality learning experiences that meet valid course learning outcomes through a web-based medium is required.

Research has provided a range of identifiers, frameworks and benchmarks from which to evaluate the quality of courses and teaching online (Meyer, 2003; Nightingale & O'Neil, 1994). One such study was commissioned, in America by the National Education Association (NEA) in conjunction with Blackboard Inc, an Internet education company, and undertaken by the Institute for Higher Education Policy. The focus was to try to determine whether the benchmarks of quality that had served traditional types of distance learning very well were relevant to online learning environments. The use, and perceived value, of 45 collaboratively identified quality benchmarks currently used in programmes, at six higher education institutes, were analysed. It was determined that, whilst some original benchmarks were found to be unnecessary, a few new ones needed to be added thus establishing twenty four essential benchmarks of quality in online learning programmes. These benchmarks are divided into seven categories: institutional support; course development; teaching/learning; course structure; student support; faculty support and evaluation and assessment (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000). The benchmarks then provide researchers, policy makers and programme developers with a common framework from which to identify quality exemplars of online teaching and learning – see for instance Lynch (2006) who uses ten of these

benchmarks in her book 'The Online Educator' as a guide to maintaining quality in course development and teaching/ learning.

Clearly it is not only educators and policy makers in the United States that are concerned about the quality of online teaching. A good example of international collaboration in pursuit of quality early childhood tertiary e-teaching and learning was described by Donohue and Fox (2006) who facilitated a Montreal presentation entitled 'EC eTeaching 2005 – Promising Practices in Teaching and Learning at a Distance'. They describe common themes running through the presentations as well as the shared identification of six key 'C' words – context; connections; capacity building; community; collaboration and convergence – creating a framework on which to base further dialogue and examination of quality early childhood online teacher education.

Similar frameworks of guidelines and standards have been created in various countries around the world. For example, in Australia, Edith Cowan University developed a framework of key aspects of quality online learning based upon learning pedagogies, resources and support principally to inform the practice of university staff. In Britain the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) used case studies as well as contemporary discourse to develop a "model of effective e-learning practice" which "suggests that the important elements to consider are social context, physical context, curricula context, established practice, e-learning advantage, intended outcomes, learners and learning activity" (Milne & White, 2005, p. 33).

This model is reflected in the recent New Zealand development of a document entitled 'Effective Practice with e-Learning Guidelines' which are guidelines for the support of e-Learning in New Zealand. This document was developed by Massey University, in collaboration with a range of tertiary education providers and with recommendations from the Tertiary e-Learning Reference Group (TeLRG). Like the model created by the JISC, of the UK, these guidelines provide direction for online education providers, practitioners and administrators and are framed by the six principles identified in the 'Interim tertiary e-learning framework': learner centred; good practice; collaboration; innovation; affordability and sustainability; and unique identity (Ministry of Education, 2004). Schulz-Novak, (2002) cited in Milne and White (2005) explain that "[q]uality standards are the criteria organisations use to identify good practice and point to ways they can improve" the benefits of which are "defining the quality of the teaching, building consensus about the processes for developing a course and helping staff learn the aspects of their job more quickly" (p. 9). The following sections of this paper identify key issues associated with the first five principles of the TeLRG. Engagement remains to be taken up regarding the sixth principle, unique identity, in terms of how, in the New Zealand context, online learning quality is inclusive of commitments to the Treaty of Waitangi and bicultural practice (in particular).

Take a learner-centred approach

> The students' experience should be a central consideration when designing and delivering learning. Students are diverse and may have different starting points in a learning situation and therefore need a range of support to achieve the intended learning outcome (Milne & Dimock, 2005, p. 10).

This approach supports a well documented view that online teaching and learning is all about the pedagogy and not the technology (Cohen, 2001; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). This viewpoint is a valid one as, fundamentally, online courses should offer the same opportunities to meet learning outcomes as any other courses available to learners. However, institutions must ensure that the technological infrastructure and a user friendly interface are in place to support effective online learning. Lynch (2006) explains that teachers or IT staff can design an online course with all the latest whistles and bells, that may address pedagogical principles of teaching and learning, but if there are problems with access speed, site navigation, retrieval or use of interactive components like discussion boards then learners become frustrated and learning becomes ineffective.

Placing the learner at the centre of teaching and learning may not sit comfortably with traditional didactic pedagogy but it is congruent with Knowles' theory of andragogy (1973). Using andragological principles of teaching, adult learners are considered to be at the centre of, and in control of, their own learning. Course design and teaching strategies should be based on the needs of the learners which, in tertiary education, mean addressing the differing entry points and learning styles of individuals and supporting a need for flexibility in their self directed educational journey. A quality online course should try to eliminate, or at least minimise, the barriers to entering an online course.

Teachers need to know what constitute barriers for their learners. A simple online or paper questionnaire before the start of the course could establish which barriers need to be addressed for each individual. For example, not all online learners are digital natives (Blinco, Mason, McLean & Wilson, 2004). Some may be complete technophobes who need assistance accessing the online platform. Others may be more technologically 'savvy' but need a 'walk through' component to familiarise themselves with the course whilst other individuals may be comfortable with the technology but not with the 'read/write' environment of online education requiring teachers to provide some form of academic support.

Many online tertiary learners require flexibility in course delivery, interactions and assessment schedules. Asynchronous components of courses can meet all of these needs. Audio and visual technologies can deliver information to the learner 'any-time, any-place' (as long as the infrastructure supports it) and provide a feeling of 'connectivity' at the same time (Blinco et al, 2004). Discussion boards allow for interaction to occur with peers or teachers at times that should be convenient to all, but the quantity, level and timeliness of these interactions can be a source of frustration. Teachers have to clearly communicate their expectations whilst allowing some room for negotiation.

Follow and share good practice

> Well established pedagogy and student support principles can be applied to e-learning. There are issues that are specific to e-learning, however, such as facilitating asynchronous communication. Evidence from the research community should inform good practice (Milne & Dimock, 2005, p. 10).

According to research deep collaboration and interaction with peers and teachers, along with time for self and peer reflection, create an optimum learning environment (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Spatariu, Hartley,

& Bendixon, 2004).   Institutions need to future-proof their online platforms by building in collaborative features such as discussion boards, chat rooms, audio-visual components and reflective journals that are user-friendly to both teachers and learners.   Such asynchronous communication may require some to view their role as a teacher through a different lens in order to build the relationships needed for successful transformative communication in an online teaching environment.   Based on the ideas of Salmon (2000), Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Preece (2000), Headley (2005) developed five key roles that he considers an online educator should play to "provide for student success and for community building" (p. 1).   These roles are: space planner; pacesetter; host; connector and mirror.   They are intended to provide space and time for interaction, support in terms of collegiality and motivation, links to teachers, resources and peers, and clear, appropriate forms of feedback.

Some teachers may find it very difficult to surrender the locus of control within the learning environment but Knowles (1973) suggests that it is imperative because adult learners tend to be self directing, have a wealth of experience to inform their learning, are task or problem oriented and intrinsically motivated by specific, personal, learning goals.   This view of tertiary learning indicates that teachers are no longer considered to be the sole producers and disseminators of knowledge (Parker, 2004).   In the current constructivist climate of teaching and learning it is suggested that they need to use more open and collaborative teaching strategies in order to promote higher order levels of cognition such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation described in Bloom's Taxonomy.   This can be challenging, especially for lecturers who subscribe to the 'theory of optimal distance' from the student and are not accustomed to establishing and maintaining learner relationships or facilitating communities of learners in their face-to-face classes. Teachers who expect to simply download or 'shovel' their traditional course content onto a website may think they are maximising costs and simplifying their own lives but the real shame is that they will be denying learners the opportunity to optimise their learning.

Use opportunities for collaboration

> Sharing information and effective practice can be an efficient form of collaboration for teaching staff. More highly collaborative approaches could result in new ways of doing things, such as sharing technical support or sharing courses with other providers.   This could provide mutual benefits of increased quality and a reduction in costs (Milne & Dimock, 2005, p. 10).

Collaboration between all stakeholders is vital to the successful implementation of an online curriculum (Inglis, 2005). This view is shared by Parker (2004) who considers that having a shared vision for online teaching and learning is the key to a successful quality system.

Teachers, who may have been used to more traditional, isolated, ways of planning courses, are now encouraged to work together to develop courses flexible enough to be used in a variety of ways or across different subject areas. Lynch (2006) indicates that collaboration, in terms of sharing online management systems, content and resources will increase rapidly in the future. She goes on to say that research shows such interoperability "reduces the cost of instruction, development and delivery by 30-60 percent" (p. 156). This means that, for many institutions who currently share the use of such management systems as 'Blackboard' or 'WebCT', this is one way for them to offset the high costs of technology and expertise.

On a more interpersonal level internal collaboration is one method that institutions may use to encourage teacher participation in platform development and review as well as providing the expertise to enable them to develop and/or support quality online courses. Collaboration in this sense can also be a key technique for encouraging teachers who may be uncomfortable with online technologies as they contribute in a group environment to the development of collectively agreed upon teaching strategies.

Collaboration is of course also an important aspect of an effective teacher's communication with learners. In online learning this extends the teacher's role to that of ensuring that online communication between learners is guided by agreements of appropriate online behaviour. For instance, by establishing acceptable rules of communication within the group or providing learners with a clear understanding of online 'netiquette' teachers may be able to avoid having to deal with 'flaming', a form of online heated disagreement that can significantly impact upon the quality of an online course.

Be innovative

> Creative ways of using e-learning should be explored. Basing innovations on research will reduce the risk factors from a given innovation. Course and teaching evaluations will identify the successful parts of the innovation and ways to build on that success (Milne & Dimock, 2005, p. 10).

Online teaching innovations must be based on sound research. Although teachers may have a broad knowledge base of traditional methods of teaching, informed by contemporary pedagogical research, many may need professional development related to online teaching and learning. There are various ways that institutions can provide this for staff. It could be that they ensure teachers have easy access to current, relevant research that has been built in to the courses. Or they could provide professional development in-house, through a professional development company, via a series of off-site workshops, by attending an accredited classroom course or experientially with an online course.

The opportunity to experience what it is like to be a learner in an online course, with a myriad of potential barriers to overcome, can be the best introduction a teacher has to the realities of online teaching. "It is only by actually experiencing the online environment as a student that teachers finally understand student's fears, stress, frustrations and joys in learning in the Web-based environment" (Lynch, 2006, p. 67). Lynch also discusses the benefits to online teaching staff of being involved in a "virtual faculty mentoring and support network" (p. 74) to overcome the possible lack of confidence or feelings of isolation that first-time teachers might experience.

Given the rapid rate of technological innovation it would be unwise for institutions not to provide mechanisms that enable consistent course evaluation and measurement of teaching effectiveness. The results may identify areas which are not working or areas of success which could be enhanced by further innovation. Institutions should encourage creativity and innovation in online teaching by providing incentives and recognition to staff that are prepared to embrace Web –based teaching.

Develop models for financial affordability/sustainability

> Investments in e-learning need to consider institutional infrastructure, staff development and student support. Systems are required to ensure quality e-learning is financially sustainable (Milne & Dimock, 2005, p.10).

The investments required to establish quality online learning courses can be enormous and often prohibitive. Therefore it is essential that institutions find ways to ensure that the systems they are proposing to develop are financially viable and are future proofed to prolong their life and effectiveness. These processes can be very time consuming for all levels of staff who will be involved in in-depth needs analyses to establish what type of learner management systems (LMS) and student management systems (SMS) are most suitable for effective learning, teaching and administration activities and the most cost effective technological infrastructure to install. Milne and Dimock (2005) in the e-learning guidelines indicate that it may be prudent for institutions to "install standard technologies as much as possible, preferably those that do not require the student to install third party applications" (p. 27) as one way to address the question of sustainability.

Policies that support the sustainability of the system should be in place before online courses commence particularly those which clearly answer questions relating to the ownership of intellectual property, copyright, (especially pertaining to work published on the Internet) and licensing of course software. "Many organisations have policies in place that allow the continued creation of courses with links however, they require a clear indication that the copyright belongs to the linked party" (Lynch, 2006, p. 138). Even with policies and copyrights in place it is still possible for institutions to become embroiled in issues surrounding legal ownership of published work which can prove to be very costly.

Conclusion

> e-Learning exploits interactive technologies and communication systems to improve the learning experience. It has the potential to transform the way we teach and learn across the board. It can raise standards, and widen participation in lifelong learning. It cannot replace teachers and lecturers, but alongside existing methods it can enhance the quality and reach of their teaching (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, as cited in JISC, 2004, p. 8).

E-Learning guidelines are a system of 'rules of thumb' that inform the instructional design, content development and supporting systems of online learning. They facilitate the development and delivery of quality online education courses. However difficult it is to define, 'quality' is an important issue that tertiary institutions need to address from a range of educational perspectives-learners, teachers and institutes. The adoption of the e-Learning guidelines implies the intention of providers to work towards improving online practices which impacts on teaching and learning in many ways. When teachers and providers effectively engage with these five e-

Learning guidelines there are a range of educational implications for learners.

- Where a 'learner- centred approach' is taken students should be able to negotiate their learning outcomes, activities and assessment methods. They should have a very clear understanding of the teacher and course expectations and know where to independently access support and assistance.

- When 'good practices' are followed, learners should be confident that through the online course they will be able to acquire skills that allow them to be successful. Success can be measured in terms of meeting learning outcomes, applying problem solving and higher order thinking skills to experiential learning activities as well as accessing online resources and research.

- By providers and teachers 'using opportunities for collaboration' the implication for learners could be the reduction of course costs as online courses and platforms are shared locally, nationally and globally.

- 'Innovation' in terms of the e-Learning guidelines seem to have more educational implications for teachers than learners through the provision of professional development, online facilitation training and mentoring. However such teacher education should eventually have a trickle-down effect that will benefit learners through more creative, effective online teaching.

- The 'development of online learning models that are sustainable' is not only important to providers, who must work within financial limitations to achieve their e-Learning goals and teachers who require a measure of employment security, but also important to learners who pay for the online services. Learners must feel confident that the provider is financially robust and has policies and practices in place to protect the investment they have made in their own education (Milne & Dimock, 2005).

Finally, to recap, international research has provided various guidelines to gauge the quality of online programmes and, although the literature utilises different language to define aspects of quality, there is general agreement on areas where online quality can be effectively addressed.

In the New Zealand context a set of guidelines have been developed under the title of 'New Zealand e-Learning Guidelines'. According to these guidelines a quality online programme is a learner-centred approach which uses good practices to create collaborative opportunities between stakeholders. The guidelines also encourage staff to be creative in developing online programmes within the confines of affordability and sustainability. Harnessing opportunities for creativity and collaboration are then essential components in making decisions about what counts as quality online learning, *and* in the ongoing evaluation of a progamme's quality.

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