
Instructor Feedback on a Formal Online Course Quality Assurance Review Process

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Abstract

This case study explored the impact a quality assurance course review had on instructors at University of Wisconsin – La Crosse (UWL). This in-house created rubric is used to conduct formal course reviews of online classes developed by instructors at this medium-sized Midwestern public university. Also included in this case study, are results from a survey completed by UWL instructors following the formal course review process. The survey was used to evaluate how the course review was received by instructors, if recommendations noted within the review were incorporated development work, and to determine if and how the process could be improved.

Introduction

Online degree programs in higher education have risen dramatically in recent years. This increase is shifting the learning environment from the traditional classroom to distance learning to online learning. “The trend of increasing distance education enrollments in the face of declining overall higher education enrollments suggests an important shift in the American higher education landscape, with contemporary learners leaning in to online options,” said Kathleen S. Ives, chief executive officer and executive director of the Online Learning Consortium in an interview with Ed Tech, a technology magazine. According to its last and final annual report released in February of 2016, *Online Report Card – Tracking Online Education in the United States*, the Babson Survey Research Group found that approximately 5.8 million students were enrolled in at least one distance education course (Allen, 2016). This increase in online course offerings has precipitated the need of ensuring that the same high-quality standards set in traditionally taught courses are also set in online courses.

Quality in higher education is multifaceted and complex. Deciding what constitutes high-quality in any course varies significantly across colleges and universities and even within institutions, therefore leading to varying degrees of what high quality entails. While quality is a subjective term for which each person applies his or her own meaning, it is also defined as the degree of excellence of something (“quality,” 2017). A course review process can help identify the quality of individual courses, areas within each course, and potentially more global areas needing improvement (Perksy, et. al., 2012). Using a standardized evaluation tool to review and confirm the quality of online courses is one way to help guide faculty during the course development phase. However, many of the institutions that we researched, conduct course reviews after the course has been taught. Hmielski and Champagne, in an article titled “Plugging in to Course Evaluation” called this consider what’s-wrong-after-it’s-over approach an “autopsy approach” to course evaluation. The timing of the approach does not lend itself to improving the course until after the term has ended thus stagnating the potential for advancing the quality of

teaching and learning. We have found that conducting a course review at the end of the term instead of at the beginning of the term allows for any adjustments that could affect the course quality.

Addressing the need for high-quality, online education courses, UWL recently revised its own in-house course review guidelines so that online courses are held to the same high academic expectations and standards as face-to-face courses. Due to the importance of a quality assurance component incorporated into the course development process, UWL's Instructional Design team offers any faculty who teach online the opportunity to have their course reviewed prior to the start of the course.

Research by Reiser and Kegelmann (1994), concluded that there was a difference between how instructional designers and faculty reviewers rated the quality of a course. This difference appears in the evaluators (instructional designer and faculty member) rating techniques. Instructional designers approach rating a course through design theories, models, and resources whereas faculty tend to rate a course through expert knowledge of the content. Noting this difference, UWL's Online Course Evaluation Guidelines are accompanied by suggestions of each standard and are presented to instructors before the official review. This allows instructors and instructional designers to review the quality of the course using the same criteria.

Along with the revised evaluation tool, the Director of Online Education and the Instructional Design team decided that in order to fully grasp the effectiveness of the course development review process, faculty who participated in a final course review would be asked to share their experience through a survey. By getting feedback from faculty on the review process, UWL can continue to offer guided professional development that leads to high-quality online education courses.

The primary reason for using surveys as data collection tools for improving courses, programs, and instruction is to obtain opinions, attitudes, or beliefs. Another reason to use them is to get information we are unable to personally observe, (Shank, 2010), including how faculty perceive the online course evaluation review process.

Context

The Director of Online Education and the Instructional Design team at UWL have been reviewing online courses, that instructors at the institution design and develop, for the past eight years. Initially, the reviews were conducted with the Quality Matters course review rubric, but approximately six years ago the institution shifted to an in-house quality assurance guideline. The in-house course review guidelines were initially created by the Director of Online Education and the Instructional Design team and then shared with and reviewed by the institution's online advisory board, which has faculty representation from the various colleges within the university. The institution felt it was important to get faculty input and feedback prior to rolling out the revised version of the UWL Online Course Evaluation Guidelines.

The guidelines are comprised of 21 standards distributed throughout five major topic categories:

1. Course Overview / Information & Content.
2. Learning Objectives & Learner Engagement.
3. Learner Support & Accessibility.
4. Interaction / Presence.
5. Assessment & Feedback.

The guidelines are a focal point of the institution's three-week intensive online instructor training course, which instructors must complete if they wish to receive funding to develop an online course. The guidelines are also shared with faculty to use as a guide as they are designing and developing online courses. Finally, the guidelines are used to conduct a final course review to ensure online courses are fully developed prior to faculty receiving remuneration for course development and teaching the course.

The guidelines are re-evaluated and revised every two to three years. After the last revision process, approximately eighteen months ago, it was decided to administer a survey to faculty, to gather their feedback on the course development and review process.

Survey Design

A twelve-question survey (see Appendix A) with six Likert scale questions and six open-ended questions was sent to instructors via email after they had completed a formal online course review.

Findings

A total of forty-one instructors completed the survey with thirty-six identifying as tenure-track faculty and five identifying as non-tenure track instructional academic staff. After reviewing participant's survey responses, we are able to describe the value the course review process has made in facilitating the design and delivery of online courses for instructors. The findings also open a reflective space for considering where improvements could be made in the current review process.

The first set of questions from the survey (see table 1) were directed toward understanding the impact the review process had in supporting instructors with knowledge and guidance in improving their online course and if they were able to transfer and apply some of that in their face-to-face courses.

Table 1. Impact of Course Review Process on Instructor Course Design

The review identified specific ways I could improve my online course.	Strongly Agree - 75% Somewhat Agree - 17.5% Disagree - 5% Strongly Disagree - 2.5%
The review will help me to improve my online course.	Strongly Agree - 80% Somewhat Agree - 12.5% Strongly Disagree - 7.5%
I intend to apply one or more of the review recommendations to my online course.	Strongly Agree - 80% Somewhat Agree - 10% Somewhat Disagree - 2.5% Strongly Disagree - 7.5%
I intend to apply one or more of the review recommendations to my face-to-face courses.	Strongly Agree - 33.33% Somewhat Agree - 43.59% Neither Agree or Disagree - 10.26% Somewhat Disagree - 7.69% Strongly Disagree - 5.13%

Note. In total thirty-seven out of forty-one respondents agreed the course review identified specific ways

they could improve their online course and perceived the review as helping them to improve their online courses. When asked if they were intending to apply one or more recommendations made by the instructional designers from the course review, thirty-six respondents agreed while 4 respondents dismissed the recommendations. When asked if they were intending to apply some of the recommendations made in the review in their face-to-face courses, thirty respondents agreed while 4 did not agree or disagree and 5 disagreed that the recommendations from the review could be applied to their face-to-face courses.

Instructors were then asked about the use of instructional tools and strategies for interacting and engaging their students in the course. Several tools and strategies mentioned included adding a welcome message for students with information on getting started, providing support materials for complex concepts, build student to student interaction, build community, use of rubrics, checklists for students, meaningful consideration of education technologies to facilitate engagement and interaction, and build in instructor and student feedback in the design of their online courses.

An average of thirty-nine respondents reported using all of the tools or strategies in their course design. We started with asking respondents to reflect (see table 2) on their use of instructional tools and strategies in their online course design process and if those design decisions were linked to the online course review process.

Table 2. Instructional tools and strategies used by Instructors in their Online Course

Instructional Tool and Strategy	Already in course	Added after review	Intend to add	Don't intend to add	Total
Welcome message with information on getting started	92.31% 36	7.69% 3	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	39
Student-to-student interactions	94.87% 37	0.00% 0	2.56% 1	2.56% 1	39
Instructor-to-instructor (timely comments or feedback in News, discussions, Dropbox, etc.)	94.87% 37	2.56% 1	2.56% 1	0.00% 0	39
Engaging or authentic assessments (activities other than exams and papers)	82.05% 32	5.13% 2	10.26% 4	2.56% 1	39
Rubrics or detailed checklists for major assignments and discussions	64.10% 25	10.26% 4	23.08% 9	2.56% 1	39
Separate discussion forums for course content, general questions, (Q&A or Raise Your Hand), and community building (e.g. Student Lounge or Water Cooler)	61.54% 24	20.51% 8	17.95% 7	0.00% 0	39
Commentaries for each module, describing instructor perspective and experience	69.23% 27	12.82% 5	15.38% 6	2.56% 1	39
Support materials for complex concepts (e.g. videos, practice activities, simulations, lab exercises, graphic organizers, etc.)	79.49% 31	12.80% 5	7.69% 3	0.00% 0	39
Meaningful integration of technology to facilitate learning	89.74% 35	7.69% 3	2.56% 1	0.00% 0	39
Others (please specify)	33.33% 3	22.22% 2	33.33% 3	11.11% 1	9

Note. In total, a majority of instructors utilized instructional tools and strategies as they were designing their courses.

A majority of instructors shared similar views on the challenges in designing an online course. While time and adapting new instructional approaches were common constraints reported by instructors, we found it interesting to see the connections most instructors made to their own professional development. For instance, one instructor shared:

Although technology has been challenging to me, the thinking that comes with it makes me reflect on my teaching in general, online or face-to-face. I never thought it was possible for me to plan a semester class as detailed as I did in my online course, because I thought I simply had too many adjustments for that; yet, I've started to see that detailed planning does not have to limit the dynamics of the class content.

The feedback from the survey reveals a majority of respondents reported the online course review process as being helpful in improving their online courses and objectively viewing feedback from instructional designers as aiding in the development and refining of their design thinking. For example,

one instructor shared “I appreciate the notes taken, perspectives provided, and most of all, the discussions about various ways to approach the design.”

Also, interesting to note was how some instructors viewed the review process as a conversational space, a “two-way” dialogue as one instructor put it, in refining their design thinking. The discussions with instructional designers were reported by many respondents as helpful in facilitating a “thoughtful conversation about online pedagogy”. One respondent shared, “Feedback from course design experts is extremely useful. It's nice to have someone either validate what I'm currently doing or to provide useful feedback and suggestions for me to improve.” While another respondent shared, “It really opened my eyes to elements I had not considered, even as an experienced online teacher.”

Conclusion

The quality of an online course in comparison to its traditional face-to-face counterpart is one of the most critical issue that impacts the design and development of an online course (Haugen, LaBarre, & Melrose, 2001). The importance of deliberate course design coupled with a course review proves essential to upholding the high-quality, online education courses that University of Wisconsin at La Crosse delivers

From the survey results reported, it is evident that faculty members who participated in the online course development review process found it beneficial and improved the quality and effectiveness of their online course. The degree to which the process was beneficial appears to be a positive one, with the majority of the faculty believing that the quality and effectiveness of their online course will improve after participating in the online course evaluation process.

While the study limited its exploration to the five major categories mentioned above, written comments from the survey concluded strong agreement among the participants that the online course development guidelines and review process are most helpful and the team approach was a positive experience.

Although the majority of participants indicated they intended to apply one or more of the review recommendations to their online course, the extent to which the instructional designers can influence the incorporation of course features is an area that is recommended for further exploration. In the case of instructors who do not intend to apply review recommendations to their online course, further investigation may also be needed. The process of developing online course evaluation guidelines has been an effective way of helping faculty improve course quality.

Recommendations

Finally, our findings and conclusions from this case study warrant the following recommendations:

Throughout the course review process, we continue to dialogue with faculty as they design and develop their course. This dialogue has evolved into a partnership between the instructional designer and faculty that is now transformational in nature. We recommend establishing the partnership well before the final course review. Starting with an initial meeting to connect with the vision the instructor has for the course and continuing through the review, is what has worked best for us. As the online review process moves towards a common goal, building this partnership early allows the online course development and review process to be a facilitative space of reflection for both faculty and instructional designers.

If your campus currently offers online course reviews for instructors developing and teaching online classes, we recommend raising awareness of the opportunity for instructors to participate in those reviews. Institutions vary on whether such reviews are required, at many institutions, they are not. Our results showed that following a review, instructors felt confident the review would help them improve their online course, planned on applying the recommendations from the review team to their course, and even reported they would apply one or more of the review recommendations to their face-to-face courses.

Since not all faculty will be receptive to change, based upon the potential recommendations provided following an online course review, we feel it is important to be careful to frame the course development

and review process as more supportive and developmental in nature and less as a regulatory or oversight process. Simply paying attention to the wording used to interact with faculty can impact their receptivity to recommendations for improvement. For example, phrases such as “Please consider adding ...” and “You may want to think about revising ...”, are, in our experience, much better received than phrases like “You must change ...” and “In order to make this a good class you really need to ...”.

When working with faculty, we have found that incorporating a team approach along with a feedback-and-refinement system (Hmieleski, 2000), acts as a connecting bridge between the technical design underpinnings and the subject matter expert content design. The review tends to be more focused and insightful and allows for any modifications to the course before it is to start. In addition, the team approach can help to minimize bias and elicit a more complete view as to the impact and potential effectiveness of the online course.

Online education is often considered inferior in quality compared with face to face education. However, to assist with the development and/or redesign of an online course and ensure the same high quality as our face to face courses, we have found that having a review prior to the start of a course is one way to facilitate effectiveness of the course and determine any areas that may need improvement. Used as a frame of reference, standardized guidelines can help guide faculty in principles specific to online course development and instruction.

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Appendix A (Survey)

What is your classification?

- Faculty
- Instructional Academic Staff
- Other

Reflecting on your recent experience with our course review process, how would you respond to the following statements:

The review identified specific ways I could improve my online course.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

The review will help me to improve my online course.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

I intend to apply one or more of the review recommendations to my online course.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

I intend to apply one or more of the review recommendations to my face-to-face courses.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

Please indicate which of the following course elements you (a) already used in your online course, prior to the online course review; (b) added since the review; (c) intend to add; or (d) do not intend to add. Your honest responses will help us determine the effectiveness of the review process.

	Already in course	Added after review	Intend to add	Don't intend to add
Welcome message with information on getting started				
Student-to-student interactions				
Instructor-to-student interactions (timely comments or feedback in News, discussions, Dropbox, etc.)				
Engaging or authentic assessments (activities other than exams and papers)				
Rubrics or detailed checklists for major assignments and discussions				
Separate discussion forums for course content, general questions (Q&A or Raise Your Hand), and community building (e.g. Student Lounge or Water Cooler)				

Commentaries for each module, describing instructor perspective and experience				
Commentaries for each module, describing instructor perspective and experience				
Support materials for complex concepts (e.g. videos, practice activities, simulations, lab exercises, graphic organizers, etc.)				
Meaningful integration of technology to facilitate learning				
Other (please specify)				

Comments regarding the Course Elements above:

Please provide answers to the following open-ended questions.

What did you find most beneficial about the consultation and review process?

What did you find least beneficial about the consultation and review process?

What specific recommendations do you recall implementing?

Describe any challenges as you were completing development of your online course.

What types of additional resources or support would have helped you in completing your work?

Do you have any other comments about the consultation and review process?

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)