

Quality in Distance Education: Exploring the Issues and Concerns

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As the use of online training and education increases, the need for assuring quality in distance education continues to be a topic of much debate. Due to the nature of distance education, the difference in the delivery of instruction is at the center of this quality debate. This paper will explore the issues and concerns of quality instruction and training and the implications for further research.

Keywords: Distance Education, E-Learning, Trends

Although the earliest comparison study on distance education, conducted by L. T. Russell in 1999, found “no significant difference” (Meyer, 2002, p. 13) in student achievement the debate concerning the quality of on-line learning continues to echo in the minds of the United States Federal Government, accrediting agencies, state regulators, faculty and students (Meyer, 2002). Adrianna J. Kezar, Series Editor for the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, states that “No topic has received so much attention in the last decade as technology and possibly no topic is a misunderstood or has received as little attention as distance education. In fact people see distance education not only as subordinate but also at some level a threat to traditional practices of teaching and learning” (Meyer, 2002 p. xiii). Even with the guidelines provided by the federal government and state regulating agencies the explosion and use of the Internet has caused the issue of quality training and education programs to remain an area of concern and debate.

Since its inception over 110 years ago, distance education has been the topic of debate because it is different than the traditional classroom-based educational format. “The foundational purpose for distance education was to allow remote students to study at home” therefore the method of delivering instruction would “evolve to methods and media that are the current status for technology-based instruction and training” (Claus, 2005, p. 426). Although the method for the delivery of instruction is different, guidelines for institutions providing courses or programs through distance education are required to follow state and federal regulations.

Although more and more educational institutions and corporations have begun to shift from the traditional form of classroom education and/or training to online courses and training some skepticism still remains. This skepticism has recently been rekindled due to reports by CBS and Sixty Minutes concerning the sale of diplomas via the Internet along with the Federal Trade Commission posting a consumer alert concerning diploma mills. While I agree that this type of deception needs to be reported and severely punished, I also agree with Michael Simonson’s statement that “Institutions with no campuses, with no faculty or only part-timers, with questionable accreditation, and with major Web promotions, are some of the characteristics of diploma mills. Unfortunately, this list reminds many of distance education institutions, too” (Simonson, 2004, p. vii). As noted by Michael Simonson, “diploma mills used to advertise on a technology of the last century—a matchbook cover. Now they promote themselves on the technology of this century—the Internet” (Simonson, 2004, p. viii). One would think that in this day and age of easy access to information that this type of deception would not be possible, yet it is. It is also not the uneducated or computer illiterate that are being deceived, it is people like Laura Callahan, a former Homeland Security executive, who thought that she was getting the “real deal” (Mabrey, 2004) and found that she had not enrolled in an accredited university; she had enrolled in a diploma mill.

While this is only one issue plaguing distance education, the lack of a universal definition of quality in distance education and a standardized pre or post assessment tool provides the medium for continued debate that the use of technology to provide instruction equates to poor quality (Meyer, 2003). Why is this debate important and why does it matter? One very important reason is that “education is too important an endeavor to tolerate the illegitimate racketeers especially ones that are profiting from the current technology-driven evolution of education” (Simonson, 2004, p. vii). Additionally with the increase web-based and/or online instruction and training, the need for a standard definition or pre-evaluation instrument is evident in order to determine the difference from a quality course, program and/or training and the “racketeers”.

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Problem Statement and Purpose

Claus (2005) stated the following:

Currently there is no universal agreement on the definition of quality in distance education. While there is no standard definition there is a concern that the focus on the quality of distance education has become an emotional. (p. 427)

and political issue, with opponents arguing that the new use of technology is, by definition, of poor quality and proponents arguing that on-line work can produce valuable student learning” (Claus, 2005, p. 427). The aim of this inquiry will center on 1) the issues and/or debates concerning quality in distance education and training, 2) why these issues continue to be a concern, and 3) the recommendations and implications for further research.

Theoretical Framework

In determining why there is still such controversy concerning distance education it is necessary to understand the nature of this controversy. The theoretical framework that supports and guides the investigation of the issues, trends and debates concerning quality in distance education are: 1) interaction and communication; 2) equivalency and 3) expectancy theory.

Interaction and Communication Theory

“The theories informing interaction and communication in distance education can be linked to several disciplines. The “most useful model of interactive qualities for distance learning provide two insights: (1) characteristics that define interaction in distance learning and (2) factors that influence it in distance learning settings” (Roblyer & Wienke, 2003 p. 79). “Interaction has long been a defining and critical component of the educational process and context and has been recognized as a critical component of both campus-based and distance education” (Anderson, 2002 p. 1).

This area of interaction and communication is still a “contentious debate among educators” (Anderson, 2002, p. 1). The challenge to obtain the correct amount of interaction and communication is a challenge that Daniel and Marquis made to distance educators in 1979, however even with the advances in technology the “perfect mix” that meets all learner and institutional needs across all curriculum and content is unlikely to be found” (Anderson, 2002, p. 1) and therefore continues to be an area of debate for distance education.

Equivalency Theory

Simonson (1999) stated the following:

The essence of this theory states that learners, both distant and local, do have different learning environments. The design of the instruction should provide learning experiences that are of the same value, although the experiences may differ slightly. This theory provides the base of “core values such as local control and personalized instruction that are held almost sacred in classical American Education. (p.276)

Thus the equivalency theory provides the understanding that while the environment is different; the learning experiences should be of equal value, hence equal in the quality of instruction through distance education” (Claus, 2004, p. 427)

Key components of this theory include the “concepts of equivalency, learning experiences, appropriate application, students and outcomes” (Simonson, Schollosser & Hanson, 1999 p. 7) and are based on the foundational values of American Education. If distance education is designed to provide “equivalent” learning experiences, debates in this area should no longer exist.

Expectancy Theory

The basis of expectancy theory deals with human motivation. “According to Victor Vroom’s expectancy theory, a person’s motivation is to achieve a goal is the belief that the actions and performance is likely to lead to a positive outcome” (Kirtley, 2002, p. 30). The nature of distance education relies on a student’s ability to manage and cope and achieve their goal. Karen Kirtley studied “student characteristics that motivate or have an effect on student satisfaction” and found a correlation between a student’s motivation to their satisfaction when enrolled in online courses (Kirtley, 2002, p.112). She found that a “student’s motivation is considered to be a determining factor in academic performance and can impact the level of student satisfaction and in the areas of convenience or flexibility of course, desire for independent structured courses, no travel to campus, and the ability to meet family and employment obligations” (Kirtley, 2002, p. 110).

If students expect distance education to aid in achieving their goals, and aspirations then institutions should begin to focus and provide quality instruction. Given all of the state and regulations concerning best practices criteria for distance education institutions, issues, debates and/or concerns should be easily resolved and minimized.

Research Questions and Methodology

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the issues and/or debates in distance education?
2. What issues and debates include quality in distance education?
3. Why are these issues and/or debates a continued focus for concern?

The method used to review the literature on distance education, issues and debates was to search scholarly electronic databases, journal publications, books and Internet sites for relevant information from 1995 to 2005. The information gathered was analyzed for its usefulness in answering the research questions concerning this study. The electronic databases accessed included: ABI Inform, ERIC, and ERIC Full Text Documents. Electronic journals accessed were the *American Journal of Distance Education*, *American Journal of Evaluation*, and the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *Business Education Forum*, *Internet and Higher Education*, *Learning and Leading with Technology*, *Computers in Schools*, *Quality Progress*, *The International Journal of Educational Management*, *Computers and Education*, and *The International Journal of Educational Telecommunication*.. Internet sites reviewed for information concerning distance education were the United States Department of Education, E-Learning Magazine, Learning Circuits Organization, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Reports such as The EDUTECH Report, Anytime, Anyplace Services for the 21st Century Student: A Report and Recommendations in a Series on Distance Learning Policy Issues, Faculty Perceptions of Teaching Distance Education Courses: Research Report, Financing Higher Education in the New Century: The Third Annual Report from the States, and Best Practices and Accreditation Issues in Distance Education. The combination of searches supplied a total of 1796 articles, and reports, however only articles dating from 1995 to 2005 were reviewed for their relevance to distance education issues, trends and debates. After analyzing the sources for relevant information from 996 articles, the results provided combination of 71 articles and reports of relevant information concerning the quality of distance education, training, trends, issues, and debates.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are that sources for this review were primarily within the years of 1995 to 2005. The literature reviewed was based on *distance education, e-learning, trends, issues and debates* keyword searches, resulting in articles primarily concerned with higher education; however a few articles in corporate training were also found. The expansion of the years reviewed along with additional international sources could provide additional articles for review and evaluation.

Literature Review

The exploration of the various literatures provided issues, concerns, trends, for distance education due to the difference in the delivery of instruction, the need for different assurances of quality and there being no consensus on quality on distance education learning quality (Twigg, 2001). After reviewing the combination of articles and reports, the following issues, concerns and trends were categorized into four areas: 1) Institutional level, 2) students, 3) faculty, 4) trends in distance education.

The literature provided a plethora of issues and/or concerns within the four categories dealing with quality. The following comments and explanations taken from the literature provide an in depth view of the concerns that were found.

Institutional Level

The issues in quality at the institutional were primarily concerned with “ensuing quality” (Ciavarelli, 2003 p. 1) in online courses and comparing the quality of online courses to traditional face to face classrooms. Other issues that impact quality were “inappropriate pre-assessments, content is too generic; complex, buyers not demanding enough, focus of learning experiences is 100 percent cognitive and zero percent affective, target audience is too broad, and tools to create course are not advanced enough” (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 87-88). Authors discussed and recommended the control of quality by providing support systems for students, faculty, implementing standards in the design of courses and programs. The “review of current policies, adoption of best practices, accelerating work to include outcome measures in accountability mechanisms, establishing common definitions and state data reporting mechanisms,” (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002 p 1) and rapid technological changes (Sakurai, 2002) were also recommended.

Recommendations for quality at the institutional level ranged from using the accrediting and regional agencies to creating completely different methods of evaluating online courses, and programs from the traditional face to face classroom.

Students

Concerns in the “learning experience” of students were again compared to the traditional face to face classroom and the online course. “Specifically the continued question from educators was whether or not online courses maintained the “high standards of excellence” (Ciavarelli, 2003, p.1) Other areas discussed were students satisfaction with on-line learning, the use of action learning, providing student-centered instruction and increased interaction between students and faculty, and students with other students. Recommendations for resolving this issue included evaluating the design of the course and/or program, engaging the students by utilizing student engagement by increased interaction and communication among students and faculty and students with other students.

Another view discusses the evaluation of students be “compared against an established standard. Quality knowledge and competence must be built into the students, not inspected in at the end of a course or program. When a student reaches the final exam, nothing can be done to enhance his or her knowledge for the course is over, therefore, inspection and testing of student knowledge and competency are to be done before and after every lecture, laboratory and tutorial” (Karapetrovic, Rajamni, & Willborn, 1999, p. 92).

Faculty

The articles found under this topic had much to say concerning faculty members for they are often split in their thoughts on distance education and on-line learning. Many hold to the value of a traditional face to face method of instruction while others believe that it is possible to provide the same value to delivering instruction via a different medium. As Doug Shale explains, “Let’s be very clear that teaching in an online environment- or any environment, for that matter- will not necessarily make a bad teacher or a good teacher and it will not necessarily render an unsatisfactory educational experience satisfactory. On the other hand, excellent teaching can and does occur without being situated in an online environment” (Shale, 2003, p. 398).

Faculty roles have changed and it is noted that in a typical online course, the faculty member is now a facilitator, “manager, mediator, and motivator of student learning” (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001). Additionally faculty teaching online courses noted that it took “significantly more time and error than teaching traditional courses. Along with the long hours for course development, faculty also noted that the lack of recognition and financial compensation for the extra effort and instructional challenges of the delivery method remain an issue” (Belcheir & Cuck, 2002 p. 9).

Trends and Distance Education

Most of the articles noted the increase in enrollment in distance education courses and programs, however one article mentioned the most “notable trends are the lack of funding and resources for technology training, the lack of administrative support for ITDE (instructional technology and distance education) issues, and faculty who are reluctant to adopt technology and distance learning” (Abromitis, 2002 p. 1). Other issues continue to circle the areas of value, successes, challenges, learning, and standards. While standards were explained to be useful in determining quality, the authors maintained that caution be taken in developing these standards, especially since the criteria for quality had not been finalized. Additionally, the lack of who would develop these standards was also noted as lacking.

Also noted is the increased use of online training within corporate organizations. The increase is due to the increase in e-learning tools such as course management systems, the use of collaborative tools such as video conferencing, electronic mail, messaging services, and electronic conferencing (Palmer, 2004). Marketing to promote e-learning is also on the rise. “The number of PC- centric and net-centric models that incorporate the newest technologies to lower costs, broaden the range of offerings, and make it easier for instructors to dynamically change content to meet the need of the class or training program are also increasing” (Palmer, 2004 p. 4).

One other area of growing concern is the degrees that are often received by students enrolling and graduating from online programs. One article noted the use of a national survey conducted in essence to ask hiring committee chairpersons who they would hire: 1) a student with an online degree or 2) a student with a traditional face to face degree or 3) a student with mixed coursework.

The study provided the “recent debates about the role of online programs in higher education include the credibility, quality and legitimacy of these programs” (Adams & Defleur, 2005). Their quantitative findings were “straightforward with 98% of their respondents selecting the candidate with a traditional degree” (Adams & Defleur, 2005). Their qualitative findings provided comments as follows:

- “While I am not wed to traditional teaching approaches, there can be no substitute for face-to-face interaction and experiential learning.

- Recommendations are important gauge to intellectual promise and collegiality, if there are no interactions of depth how could such a judgment be measured?
- A degree obtained via the Internet is akin to one ordered from a catalog.
- Computer technology has become an essential part of instruction and secondary activities. This may put candidate B (50% online 50% coursework) in an advantaged position, which is my consideration for candidate B” (Adams & Defleur, 2005).

Conclusions

Throughout the last ten years distance education has advanced technologically in the method of delivery however issues and concerns continue to plague it. Issues and concerns regarding institutions, students, and faculty are still found. Distance education “reverses social dynamics by brining school to students, rather than students to school. This leads to a host of issues for administrators to debate such as the impact of electronic education on tenured teaching, redefining what it means to have a teacher present in the classroom, and other personnel issues” (Sherry, 1995 p. 359) The impacts of distance education to the institution, current and potential students, and faculty is evident enough to ensure that analysis at every level needs occur, the question remains which analysis should be used and should all administrators be using the same one?

It is also evident that there have been some very good experiences with distance education at the institutional, student and faculty levels. However, despite all of the advances, tools, and methods of delivery, issue remains as a constant reminder of how different distance education and/or learning are still viewed and it is the issue of quality. While technology has changed the issue of “what makes for quality” in an online course or program continues to resound throughout literature.

The reasons for this continuous debate are many, yet they can all be compiled into three categories, 1) distance education is still continued to been viewed as different from the traditional form of education, and 2) many are still skeptical of online programs and view then as having little or not quality, and 3) there is no consensus on what constitutes for quality in distance education courses and/or programs.

With the increase use and improvement of technology distance education and e-learning will continue to be utilized in higher education and in organizational training. Recently organizations have replaced traditional classroom training with some form of e-learning and/or web-based training. A study conducted by the Sloan Consortium, a “collection of institutions and organizations”, (Simonson, 2003, p. vii) reported that “an overall growth rate for enrollments in online courses is expected to be 20%, for-profit institutions expect a growth rate that is faster than that of other institutions, private, non-profit institutions expect to use online education less than other institutions, given an option, students will enroll in online courses, and overall attitudes of faculty remain conservative about the quality of online education” (Simonson, 2003, p. viii).

Unfortunately, the increase of deceptive practices resulting in diploma mills has also continued to plague the Internet as well. “Since trends indicate that distance education is on the rise and will continue to do so, further research on the development of applicable and effective evaluation instruments for measuring quality” (Claus, 2005, p. 431) based on an agreed set of criteria is warranted.

Areas for further research are in determining the features and/or criteria that would differentiate accredited, quality instructional institutions from diploma mills for the development of a pre-evaluation instrument that could be used to gauge the quality of instruction in a course and/or degree program. The production of “new methods for pre-evaluation of quality centered on the student/employee can then aid practitioners and students in obtaining quality in online training, courses or programs that are beneficial in promoting learning and performance” (Claus, 2005, p. 431).

Contributions to HRD

“According to Swanson and Holton, (2001) the improvement ideas of making positive change, attaining expertise, developing excellent quality, and making things better are central to HRD. This core goal of *improvement* is possibly the most important idea in the profession and the core motivator of HRD professionals” (Claus, 2005, p.431). This core goal of improvement in order to make a positive change then it is imperative that a pre-evaluation tool can be placed in the hands of practitioners, and ultimately consumers when considering a training program, course and/or degree program for training development, career development, and/or organizational development.

“Without a systematic and comprehensive evaluation, it is hard to see how e-learning (distance education) as an HRD strategy can be developed to ensure the delivery of quality human resources so important to organizational strategy” (Macpherson, et al, 2004: p. 307). HRD could provide this systematic and comprehensive evaluation by

beginning to determine the criteria for quality in distance education course or program and then using this criteria develop a pre-assessment instrument that can be used by students or practitioners. "This effort could aid in bringing HRD academicians and scholarly practitioners to lead in the creating of new knowledge, theories and practice for the field of HRD" (Claus, 2005, p. 431). HRD could blaze the trail for the advancement and acceptance of accredited online degrees, and quality training programs along with promoting its stance on value and ethics for the benefit of the organization, group and individual.

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