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How to Design & Deliver Quality Online Education - Educational Technology Solutions Magazine

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Which is better, online or face-to-face learning? This used to be a common research question. Later, the research results were aggregated and meta-analysed, yielding the no significant difference finding. It turned out that there is no clear winner. Students choose online or on-campus or, increasingly, a combination of the two, for various reasons and with diverse outcomes. In addition, some education is high quality and some teachers are inspirational and some are not, in both online and face-to-face designs.

This is similar to the dogs or cats debate. There are large and small dogs. Some need regular walks and are therefore good for human fitness. Others are great companions for couch potatoes. Likewise, some cats purr and snuggle and others are independent and treat humans with disdain. Cats can often be left to their own devices, accommodating their humans’ weekend away and can live successfully in high-rise apartments. Most dogs need to be escorted out and cannot be left. Some sworn dog-lovers adopt a cat and convert, and vice-versa. Some people choose to have a dog and a cat and love them equally. Is there a diagnostic test to reliably predict which humans will be happier with dogs or cats as pets?

Returning to the context of online learning, a current popular line of research is based on the proposition that we can predict which types of people are most likely to succeed in online learning and which are not. The most robust hypothesis to date is that people who have high self-regulation skills tend to succeed in online learning. How useful is this research? What about people who have low self-regulation, but live in rural, regional and remote areas, without access to physical campuses? What about people who want/need to work full-time during the day and can only fit learning into late evening hours after they have put their children to bed? Educators cannot cater to only the most suitable students. The onus is on the educational institutions (and thus educators) to accommodate diverse learners in their chosen mode/s and to design and deliver high-quality learning opportunities to all enrolled students.
This article uses the acronym ONLINE as a framework to guide the design and delivery of quality online education for diverse learners. High quality ONLINE education is:

Open: learning resources are accessible and available, including after the course.
Navigable: well-planned interfaces allow students to find what they need.
Learning: sites are designed to develop knowledge, skills, attributes and identity.
Interactive: dialogue is supported amongst and between teachers and learners.
Networked: curriculum and activities foster broad-reaching connections.
Engaging: teachers invite, model and sustain enthusiastic presence for learning.

Likewise, the same ONLINE acronym can be used to describe the antithesis. Poor quality ONLINE education is:

Obstructed: learning resources are controlled and restricted behind a curtain.
Nonsense: chaotic interfaces prevent students from finding what they need.
Lazy: sites are only about completion and do not promote positive change.
Isolating: students feel alone, and often lonely, throughout the experience.
Narrow: curriculum and activities are analogous to a locked filing cabinet.
Empty: teachers abandon the site and the overall experience is unfulfilling.

The evaluation tool presented as Figure One, on the next page, can be used to honestly assess existing online education course sites and set priorities for development and improvement. It is recommended that students and teachers separately and anonymously rate the online education sites and that the stakeholder (student/teacher) perspectives are then compared and contrasted.

When students are asked what they want (and need) in a quality online learning experience, the responses are consistent across universities. Students say:

- The curricular materials must be up-to-date and relevant. The selected materials are designed to prepare graduates to meet the entry expectations and preferably lead the way in their chosen industry. If a textbook is required reading, it must be actively used throughout the course. In addition, links must be made to current research, updates and authors in the respective field. (Aligned with framework qualities – Open and Networked)
- Assessment, and how students will be graded, must be fair, relevant, reasonable and clearly described. Students prefer to have access to exemplar submissions to guide their own work. There must be a clear rationale for each choice of assessment, and at least some of the assessment should be designed such that students are actively engaged in doing similar work to what they will be doing in industry upon graduation. Students need regular, clear and specific feedback, which can be
Figure One: Evaluation Tool to Rate Online Education Design/Delivery

Highlight the most accurate descriptor for each row below.

| Open: learning resources are accessible & available. | There is not enough access to learning resources. | Obstructed: resources are controlled and temporary. |
| Navigable: interfaces make it easy to find things. | The interface could be improved for findability. | Nonsense: interfaces do not make sense. |
| Learning: develops skills, knowledge and attributes. | The site feels mostly about completion – not beyond. | Lazy: site does not promote pos. development. |
| Interactive: promotes teacher and student dialogue. | Mostly experienced alone, without others present. | Isolating: experience is alone (sometimes lonely). |
| Engaging: teachers enthusiastically present. | Teachers do not seem to care about course/learners. | Empty: overall experience is unfulfilling. |

Figure Two: First Steps for Quality Online Education Design and Delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open</th>
<th>Navigable</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Interactive</th>
<th>Networked</th>
<th>Engaging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create links from and to key industry research and websites.</td>
<td>Develop, share and follow a consistent program glossary of educational terms.</td>
<td>Identify the key digital tools that graduates are likely to use and include them in the course.</td>
<td>Create a marked discussion forum and post a clear marking guide. Model strong interaction.</td>
<td>Dedicate marks to students posting completed assessment on a digital portfolio.</td>
<td>Create and post an auto-biographical video about you and what attracted you to the taught discipline.</td>
</tr>
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iteratively applied to improving their performance. In other words, there should be multiple chances/opportunities to learn and demonstrate knowledge, skills and attributes. Since students are already online, they should be encouraged to post, and thereby showcase, their work and their profiles. (Aligned with framework qualities – Learning and Networked)

- Online learning should feel like a carnival. The enthusiasm of the teacher is tangible and exciting. The learning resources have been chosen with care. The assessment is active and involves doing. The students get to know one another. The teacher actively invites engagement and models how to do so appropriately. Online interaction tools are applied and moderated throughout the course. The alternate metaphor – that students too often report experiencing – is that of a filing cabinet. In advance of the course, the teacher selects and organises the files, posts them in the course site, sends an announcement to commence and then disappears. Mature-age learners who experienced correspondence education say that some online learning feels as though the binders have now been put up online and the printing costs deferred to the students. (Aligned with framework qualities – Learning and Networked)

This article concludes with specific strategic design advice for commencing design of online education that complies with the ONLINE framework.

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