Unit 6: Quality Assurance

Institutions interested in implementing a blended instructional delivery model have many things to consider, but one of them should be the development of a quality assurance process. Such a process can produce invaluable benefits—for instructors who have taught blended courses for many years and for those who are just starting, as well as for the institution itself by being able to demonstrate to accrediting agencies that it has a mechanism in place to support high-quality course design and delivery. However, the greatest benefits of an institution-wide, learner-centered quality assurance process for blended courses might accrue to students.

Learning Objectives

- To understand the role of a quality assurance process in the successful implementation of a blended learning initiative
- To understand the multiple uses of a blended learning course rubric in blended learning course development and evaluation
- To review the possibilities for integrating blended learning best practices to support student success

About Quality Assurance

Although several quality assurance processes have been developed, one of the most research-supported, tested, and widely implemented is that produced by Quality Matters.[1] Quality Matters (QM) is an instructor-centered peer review process designed to confirm the quality of online and blended courses and online components. Originating from a Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant, the QM rubric emerged from a collaboration among 19 schools to develop and test standards that developed a sustainable quality assurance process that is replicable and scalable for institutions and consortia.[2]

A blended learning course rubric[3]—QM or other—can be used in a variety of ways. One possibility is to use it in a peer course review process, which typically has the following steps involved in its development:

- Several instructors in a variety of disciplines are trained in best practices for developing and teaching blended courses. It is preferable that these instructors have a minimum of one year of online or blended learning teaching experience.
- Instructors assemble into teams of three to serve as peer reviewers. It is preferable that the review teams include individuals who do not know each other or are from different departments or institutions so as to limit the amount of bias and information that they have about the course to be reviewed. One of the most valuable aspects of a course review is the opportunity to review a course from a student's perspective, which often includes very little, if any, background knowledge or context relating to a given course.

- The course peer review process could be voluntary or mandatory, depending on institutional needs and preferences, but should be constructed in such a way that it serves as a supportive mechanism in developing high-quality courses.
- Upon concluding the review process, the instructor review team makes specific suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the course in a highly constructive manner. The instructor who submitted the course for review then has the option to make the suggested modifications.
- After being modified, the course is then reviewed once again, and if it meets the established standards, it is deemed as passing the review.

In order for the quality assurance process to be successfully implemented, several principles should be considered and applied:

- At the foundation of any process should be the common goal to promote student success and learning in a blended environment.
- The established quality assurance process should have a significant amount of instructor leadership, involvement, and support.
- The institution, college, or department implementing a blended learning quality assurance process should be overtly committed to an ongoing quality improvement process of which course peer review is a portion.
- The established quality assurance process should be established as a collaborative process among instructor peers designed to support one another and save time in developing and improving blended courses.
- The selected quality assurance process should be based in the research literature and proven instructional design principles related to student learning in blended or online learning environments.

It can be helpful to consider the following best practices for blended learning, especially during an institutional planning and implementation phase:[4]

- That education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program;
- That learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs;
- That instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity are organized around substantive and coherent curricula that define expected learning outcomes;
- That institutions accept the obligation to address student needs related to, and to provide the resources necessary for, their academic success;
- That institutions are responsible for the education provided in their name;
- That institutions undertake the assessment and improvement of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning; and
- That institutions voluntarily subject themselves to a peer review process.

Embarking upon any kind of course review process, especially if no process has previously existed, can be difficult and quite a departure from existing institutional culture. Below are some important reminders of the purpose of quality assurance. Quality assurance is:

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- Not about an individual instructor, but about improving course design and quality
- Not about instructor evaluation, but about a diagnostic tool to facilitate continuous improvement of blended courses
- Not a win/lose or pass/fail test, but a supportive mechanism that can ultimately lead to greater student success

It might be helpful to remind the participants that many of them likely took most, if not all, face-to-face courses while they were in higher education, rather than online or blended courses. As such, most instructors have no personal experience from which to draw upon when designing or teaching blended courses. For that reason alone, having a course peer review process can be tremendously helpful in assisting instructors become experts teaching in alternative instructional modes.

Activity

At some point during this unit, perhaps as an introduction to rubric components, consider administering the poll below. Ask participants to rate each of the course areas to indicate how much support they might need in each (5 = greatest amount of support, 0 = no support):

1. Developing the section of my course that introduces and provides an overview

2. Developing my course's learning objectives.

3. Developing tools with which to assess and measure my students' learning

4. Collecting and implementing sound use of course resources and support materials

5. Creating and implementing activities that stimulate and encourage learners to interact with me, other students, and course content

6. Selecting and deploying course technology in such a way as to enhance and support student learning

7. Constructing ways to support learners in my blended course

8. Developing ways to ensure that my course complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act when necessary

9. Assuring that items 2 through 6 align

Most blended and online course review rubrics contain several components that are included during a review process. As an example, the QM rubric contains nine general standards listed below. A more through description of these can be found online at http://www.qualitymatters.org.

1. Course Overview and Introduction

2. Learning Objectives

3. Assessment and Measurement

4. Resources and Materials

5. Learner Interaction

6. Course Technology

7. Learner Support

8. Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance

9. Course Component Alignment

Instructors' comfort level in developing each of these areas may vary, but it is worth noting that a few of these are often difficult for new blended instructors: assessment and measurement, learner interaction, course technology, and course component alignment. Course alignment is perhaps the most challenging to address, but in some ways the most important. Once a course is mapped (see "Mapping the Blended Course" in Unit 2), an instructor can more easily see how each component relates to others. For instance, an instructor might ask:

- Do my objectives align with the resources, technologies, and assessments selected?
- Do I have an objective that is not supported by activities or materials?
- Are learners using technologies that are not pedagogically connected to course objectives?
- Do I have learning objectives whose outcomes will not be measured in some way?

Developing these areas can be challenging because participants usually have had little or no experience developing or implementing them in an instructional environment that is partly online. In other words, an instructor may have never had to develop an online assessment or online discussion activity. The suggested poll above can be helpful in determining areas where support is needed to customize a program or process that specifically targets those areas.

Implementing quality assurance can have as an outcome creating a course review process, but it may also produce many other favorable outcomes. Some examples are listed below:

- Internal review program and departmental review processes
- Online and face-to-face education quality assurance processes
- Locally developed guidelines for course development: face-to-face, online, and blended
- Locally developed checklist for the improvement of existing blended courses
- Development of instructor support programs for different types of courses
- The development of local distance learning best practices and policies
- A way to collect evidence of student learning outcomes and successful programs for regional and professional accreditation agencies

Developing a Quality Assurance Pilot

As mentioned earlier, developing and implementing a quality assurance program or process that is relevant and supportive of institutional goals and culture can be challenging. Upon initial implementation, a college or university might consider conducting a pilot in which instructors and other members of the instructional community participate on a voluntary basis. During the pilot phase, it is especially important to construct a methodology and a data-collection component that allows the process to be closely examined. Another important consideration during a quality assurance pilot is to involve individuals at various levels of the organization: vice presidents, deans, department chairs, instructors, and instructional design and technology staff. Once the pilot phase has concluded, the task force or pilot team can review the results and make

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determinations and recommendations for next steps, which could range from a full implementation to a smaller, focused approach to supporting blended course development.

Quality Assurance Resources

- CSU Chico, Rubric for Online Instruction: http://www.csuchico.edu/celt/roi/index.shtml
- Illinois Online Network: http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/initiatives/qoci/rubric.asp
- University of Southern Mississippi Learning Enhancement Center: http://www.usm.edu/lec/docs/LEC_Online_course_rev2.pdf
- Houston Community College: http://online-course-design.pbworks.com/f/Online_Course_Rubric08.pdf
- Craven Community College: http://www.cravencc.edu/CCCDERubric20082009_1.rtf

Endnotes

1. For more information, go to http://www.qualitymatters.org.

2. The EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative does not endorse one quality assurance process over another, and several other models do exist; however, because the Quality Matters model is widely used in higher education and has been extensively vetted and tested, it merits mention here as an example of a best practice in blended learning.

3. For more information about the Quality Matters rubric, go to http://www.qualitymatters.org/Rubric.htm.

4. Adopted from *Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs*, http://www.ncahlc.org/download/Best_Pract_DEd.pdf.