

Online Courses: Characteristics of Quality

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These characteristics described in this document are grounded in decades of online educational research and effective practice in online teaching and learning. Online education reports frequently describe the problem of learners who feel isolated, anxious, and uncertain about how well they are doing in their online courses. Obviously, this problem can become a retention issue for academic institutions. The lack of learner persistence in online courses is one of the challenging aspects of online programs. The following characteristics are commonly found in effective online learning experiences:

Active Learning

Learner assignments go beyond receiving information to working with the information in multiple ways that foster greater understanding, including the ability to relate the new knowledge to real world situations. Active learning plays a critical part in sustaining learner motivation in online courses.

Implication: Using online and “off” line assignments learners apply their new knowledge to their local context through analysis of live cases and report back to the class their insights through producing a media or text presentation.

Social Connectedness

Participants experience an online course as an interactive community where they are learning together with others who know them. Further, they experience the social involvement of the instructor through various forms of communication.

Implication: Instructors make it a priority to create a trusted community of learners online through assignments that allow learners to grow strong personal relationships.

Learner Support

Preparation, orientation, and resources (people, information, technology) are in place and available to support the success of the learner. Individual concerns and questions are welcomed and responded to in a timely and meaningful way. Learner

diversity, such as culture or special learning need is addressed early in the course in order to support learner success.

Implication: Technical assistance is easily available to learners when something does not function as expected. A community forum is created and invites learners to raise any questions they have about the course and their assignments. Learners have ample opportunity to experience a new online tool before required to use it in a graded assignment.

Appropriately Organized

Information learners need to be successful in the use of technology tools is readily accessible and communication about the course is clear and well organized. Linear and restrictive course design, that limits learner access to supportive resources and offers only standardized assignments, is increasingly a thing of the past.

Implication: A guide or “map” of the course activities, requirements and resources is provided for the learners in order to reduce anxiety, focus attention, and help with staying on schedule. This “map” can be, but is not always, part of the syllabus.

Incorporates Multiple Forms of Formative Assessment

Feedback on assignments is prompt, frequent during the course, and focused on increasing learner success. It may be provided by the instructor to the learner, learner-to-learner, by the learners’ own self-assessment, and/or by automated feedback through the LMS, such as with a completed quiz.

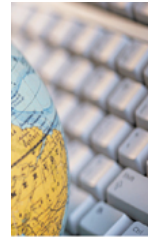
Implication: The use of rubrics (a tool that identifies how well one demonstrates the expectations of an assignment) is a valuable practice in online learning. Rubrics are used when immediate feedback on student performance is desired.

Clear Expectations

Expectations on matters such as acceptable communication practices, consequences for late assignments, and what to do in the case of an emergency that interrupts the course are available in advance. Online course participants, in particular, are expected to be proactive self-directed learners, responsible in keeping to the course schedule, in initiating communication, and in participating in course activities.



Implication: Interaction online is vital for instructors to “see” how well learners are progressing, thus learners need to know that the expectations are not optional.



Instructor Initiated Communication

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The instructor is personally “present” relationally and engaged with learners through multiple forms of communication. The instructor ensures that all participants, including diverse learners, understand the course “learning “map”, expectations, and ways to receive assistance.

Implication: The course begins with a private personal email to each learner. An audio or video message of welcome is posted on the course Home page.

Courses are Regularly Updated and Utilize Compatible Technology

Course revision is expected and a normal feature of online teaching since both the instructor and learners are adjusting to their new online roles in a new learning environment. Instructors are attentive to organizational and technology glitches that hinder learning. Obstacles, such as inadequate time to complete a sequence of assignment steps are dealt with in real time during the course. The technology utilized for the online learning space is appropriate to the interactive pedagogy, current with the latest version, and provides “easy-of-use” for instructors and learners.

Implication: Learner feedback is a valued part of the revision cycle and is sought during and after a course in order to improve the learning design and organization of the course. Out dated versions of the LMS are replaced on an annual basis.