

Evaluation in Online Courses

BY BETH BYRD AND KAREN LOTT

Online instruction is no longer just an idea for the future. Classes in online learning now have a place on most lists of postsecondary course offerings. Among educators, however, concern still lingers about the online evaluation process. Can the evaluation of online instruction have integrity equal to its counterpart in traditional classroom instruction? This study presents the results of a survey conducted among postsecondary instructors of online education, in order to better assess the efficacy of online evaluation.

Current Literature

Articles abound as a testament to the concerns instructors have about evaluation in online courses. Assessment, cheating, plagiarism, and identity verification are issues discussed at length in various distance learning and education journals. While these same issues have troubled educators for years in traditional settings, online instructors are now forced to closely examine them in a new medium. For example, the comparison of handwriting samples or font style is no longer an effective means of detecting academic dishonesty. Conversely, an online instructor who corresponds frequently with class members may be even more familiar than "live" instructors with the writing style, tone, and level of discourse of each individual student.

Heberling (2002) states that maintaining academic integrity is a challenge in both traditional and online delivery modes. He believes, however, that online instruction may be more conducive to detecting and combating plagiarism than traditional education. An online instructor is likely to know a student's writing

style, due to the frequency of e-mail and chat typically required in an online course. If a passage sounds too good to be true, Heberling recommends a reverse Internet search, tracking back to original sources by using key words and phrases.

Other strategies that might prevent academic dishonesty include exploring the various disadvantages of online learning and becoming familiar with them; taking the time to design effective online assessments; employing original assignments and readings or alternative, project-based assessments that require creativity; and asking students to commit to an institutional academic integrity/dishonesty policy (Olt, 2002).

Most educational institutions provide Web pages designed to assist instructors who are preparing to teach and evaluate in an online class format. Florida Atlantic University (2003), for example, provides a variety of tips and suggestions, ranging from how to enhance existing course materials to recommendations for administering quizzes and exams.

The survey results discussed in this paper support the current trend in the literature: Instructors who were surveyed saw online issues as manageable and had valuable suggestions for combating problems associated with evaluation. Respondents offered some of the same suggestions found in the literature, as well as some new and fresh ideas to help online instructors successfully evaluate students' performance.

Purpose and Definition

Evaluation in online course offerings is the focus of this study. The terms *online learning* and *distance education* are sometimes used interchangeably. The Distance Learning Resource Network

defines distance education as instructional delivery that does not constrain the student to be physically present in the same location as the instructor. Historically, distance education meant correspondence courses. Today, audio, video, and computer technologies are the common delivery modes (Steiner, 2003). For the purposes of this survey, the term *distance education* assumes that the teacher is in one location physically with a class, but at the same time, students may be at remote sites viewing and/or interacting with that class. The term *online course* assumes that the course is taught using the Web, and students access the materials when they choose.

A number of respondents considered verification of identity an issue in online learning, even during the administration of proctored exams. How does an instructor know that the student receiving credit for the course is the same student taking the tests and performing the work? One of the particular reasons for conducting this survey was to gain some insight from instructors involved in the online learning process regarding this issue.

Limitations

This study was limited to computer instructors at the postsecondary level throughout the state of Mississippi. Represented in this group are instructors from the eight universities and the Mississippi Virtual Community College (MSVCC). The MSVCC is a consortium of 14 of Mississippi's community colleges. The MSVCC system allows students to take courses from community colleges anywhere in Mississippi, while getting support services from their local colleges.

Methodology and Data Sources

In order to study the online learning policies that concern evaluation, Web sites at the eight universities in Mississippi were visited. The policy of each institution allowed the online instructors the freedom to choose their preferred methods of student evaluation. The guidelines specifically stated that the use of proctored examinations were at the discretion of the instructors.

In order to gather data in regard to the evaluation of online courses, a survey using both Likert-style scaling and open-ended questioning was developed to be disseminated electronically to computer instructors. A database including names and e-mail addresses of 136 computer instructors at the postsecondary level in the state of Mississippi was compiled from visiting individual institution Web sites.

Instrumentation

A panel of experts with backgrounds in the areas of institutional research, Web-based surveys, and online learning reviewed the survey for clarity, content, organization, reliability, and validity. After this review, a pilot survey was conducted with the postsecondary panel of experts. Following some minor revisions and additions, a second pilot was administered to this same group. This group of experts was not included in the actual study. Based on the feedback from this group, final corrections were made to the survey.

computer courses at community colleges and universities in the state of Mississippi. Ten days later, an additional e-mail was sent informing instructors of the last date that the online survey would be active. The survey results were automatically sent to an Access database that assured anonymity. No survey results were viewed until the survey instrument was deactivated.

Table 1. Results of Online Instructors Survey

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|---|--------------|------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| My institution has a policy/guideline established in regard to evaluation of online courses. | | | | |
| Strongly Agree 36% | Agree 44% | Disagree 9% | Strongly Disagree 2% | I Don't Know 9% |
| I was able to develop a well-designed and understandable method of student evaluation for my online course(s). | | | | |
| Strongly Agree 45% | Agree 49% | Disagree 2% | Strongly Disagree 2% | No Opinion 2% |
| The evaluations used within my online course(s) are comparable in academic integrity to those of my traditional course(s). | | | | |
| Strongly Agree 49% | Agree 44% | Disagree 0% | Strongly Disagree 3.5% | No Opinion 3.5% |
| I have concerns about validating that the person being evaluated or completing the online course work is actually the individual receiving the credit. | | | | |
| Strongly Agree 11% | Agree 33% | Disagree 38% | Strongly Disagree 15% | No Opinion 3% |
| My responses to online course activities, assignments, and graded work were timely and appropriate. | | | | |
| Strongly Agree 38% | Agree 53% | Disagree 3.5% | Strongly Disagree 3.5% | No Opinion 2% |

Data Analysis

The survey response rate was 49%. Of those responding, 82% had taught or were currently teaching an online course. Table 1 summarizes the responses to the Likert-style questions.

Some instructors reported using electronic syllabi, 51%; and instructor's Web page, 16%. Some instructors used more than one means of dissemination.

Two open-ended questions were used on the survey. The first asked the instructors to list which testing methodologies that had been successful evaluation tools. This question elicited a variety of responses. Many instructors reported using proctored testing for both mid-term and final examinations. Some instructors reported basing grades solely

on projects that were submitted weekly. One instructor reported the requirement of original papers and discussions based on class material as a means for evaluation. Many of the survey respondents had clearly used a great deal of creativity in developing a variety of evaluation tools to teach an online course that would ensure adequate evaluation. A categorized summary of the feedback from the online instructors follows:

1. Preparing to teach.

- Take a course on how to teach online before beginning.
- Talk to someone who is teaching a similar online course to find out how they evaluate students.
- Practice getting comfortable with communicating in writing.

- Learn about the online system you are using. An instructor familiar with the tools can assist students more effectively, leading to better learning and more accurate evaluations.
- Give yourself plenty of time to prepare. It would be best to develop the course prior to teaching it, rather than developing it while teaching. Prepare for many, many e-mails.

2. Assigning coursework.

- Include in the first week's assignment a signed, handwritten essay to be mailed to the instructor. Then use that signature to check the signature on each paper-and-pen proctored test to ensure the correct person took the test. (Proctors should also require photo IDs before administering a test.)
- Give assignments weekly and have at least 2 to 3 proctored tests.
- Remember that directions must be clear and easily understood.
- Prepare detailed assignment guidelines that include an evaluation framework, clear guidance on quantity desired, and clear expectations on quality of online dialogue as it figures into the course grade.

3. Developing methods.

- Teach with the primary objective of learning in mind; take caution not to overemphasize administrative detail at the expense of content.
- Make learning objectives very specific, so that students fulfill each of the requirements.
- Divide students into groups of four or five so that they may interact. It can be overwhelming to read comments and assigned work from a single, large group of students and respond in a meaningful manner. Students feel more engaged with one another in small groups. Design mechanisms that allow them to enter into discussion with the other groups.
- Communicate often with students and get to know them and their style of discourse, their spelling and grammatical skills, and their level of participation, etc. These measures help to determine that they are, in fact, doing their own work.
- Stay in touch with students to remind them of your presence. Requiring the

submission of weekly assignments helps both teachers and students stay focused and connected.

- Be patient! Expect some confusion in spite of the best-laid plans.

4. Evaluating coursework.

- Have as many exams proctored as possible.
- Design performance tests that measure objectives, but in a way that no two students' papers will be identical.
- Modify traditional evaluation tools for the online environment.
- Check carefully to see who actually created the documents that are sent.
- Use more than one method of evaluation.
- Ask students to sign an integrity statement at the end of a test, confirming that the test was completed without assistance from anyone or any disallowed resource.

Evaluating Student Opinions of Online Learning

To get an accurate reading on the efficacy of online evaluation, students' opinions of their courses must be considered. While the questions posed to students addressed their overall opinions of online learning, and did not specifically target evaluation, their responses indicate their overall satisfaction level with the medium. A survey of students enrolled in online courses offered through the MSVCC during Fall 2002 was administered by the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges of Mississippi (Northeast Mississippi Community College, 2003).

In response to the survey question, "Based on your experience, how do you rate the quality of online instruction compared with traditional classroom courses?" 24% responded that traditional classroom instruction is better, and 18% responded that online instruction is better.

In response to the question, "Based on your experience, how do you feel the integrity of online instruction compares with traditional courses?" 73% responded that integrity is about the same, 20% responded that traditional classroom integrity is better, and 7% responded that online instruction integrity is better.

Conclusion

Instructors considering teaching an online course will benefit from advance preparation. Evaluation will be a primary concern for both instructors and students as instructors experiment with new methods and formats, but it is not an insurmountable barrier. It is advantageous for instructors to network, in order to share ideas and continue to search for creative methods of evaluation. As shown in this study, the integrity of evaluation can still be assured when using creative and alternative methods of evaluation.

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