Why Evaluate Online Courses Differently Than Face-to-Face Courses?

“No one wishes to delve into the discussion of what a faculty member is doing in his/her physical or online classroom...Thus there is an ongoing debate [concerning online courses] between the ‘academic freedom’ of a faculty members and the ‘academic integrity’ of a course” (Rob, 2010, p. 419).

Rationale 1: Online Learning is a “New” Medium Without Clear Standards and Procedures

Since online learning is not backed by hundreds of years of tradition, collective experience, and precedent, as is traditional higher education, it must be examined and managed in different ways.

While professors and instructors are trusted to deliver face-to-face courses with integrity to meet long-established standards, online instructors are often cast into the unknown with no guidelines or clear standards. A professor knows the “rules” for teaching in traditional courses (scheduling, expectation of duration of class, institutional policies). Precedent set for online education is often “nebulous,” so each course is assigned to the direction of often untrained and unwilling instructors. This leads to great fluctuation in learning outcomes. Even though an instructor has been teaching face-to-face competently for years, online pedagogy calls for new learning.

In a 2009 study, Online Learning as a Strategic Asset, involving over 10,000 responses from faculty at major universities and colleges, 64% of faculty said it took more effort to teach online and 85% said it took more effort to develop an online course. Most also rated support services for building and teaching online courses as “unsatisfactory.”

One observation of the report (Volume I: A Resource for Campus Leaders) was:

Campus leaders should maintain consistent communication with all faculty and administrators regarding the role and purpose of online learning programs as they relate to academic mission and academic quality. Further, campus leaders, administrators, and faculty must all work together to improve the quality – or perceived quality – of online learning outcomes (p. 6).

Conclusions of the report included that most faculty support online learning as a way to benefit students and that this is the “foundation for a dialogue” about quality which “should move beyond ‘perceptions’ and focus on the direct assessment of the learning outcomes associated with online courses” (p. 49).

Volume II (The Paradox of Faculty Voices: Views and Experiences with Online Learning) showed that over 80% of faculty members with no experience in teaching online thought that learning outcomes for online courses were inferior to face-to-face instruction (p. 6). A majority of those who have taught online believed that learning outcomes were as good as or better than face-to-face instruction (p. 7).

With such disparity of conceptions about online education within the same institution, some standard of course quality, based on institutional or national standards, and examination of learning results are needed. The particulars of online learning are perceived along a wide continuum of quality and results, with definitive data still emerging.
Findings also included faculty ratings of support systems for online development and teaching as poor.

Thus, the university must support faculty members in developing, teaching, and evaluating online courses. It is not perceived as “fair” to ask faculty to embark untrained and unsupported into a new medium. The review process is a training activity, designed to open discussion about effective and research-proven practices in online learning and to improve offerings over time. There should be both support and acknowledgement by the institution for the work professors put into online courses. That includes assistance in developing quality as defined by the institution.

**RATIONALE 2: LAWS WHICH GOVERN ONLINE LEARNING MUST BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT**

Recent litigation has brought online course legalities to the forefront. Earlier this year, St. Mary-of-the-Woods College in Indiana was told it must “refund $42 million in federal financial aid dollars.” Its online courses had been classified as “correspondence courses.”

The law changed in 2010, so it is good to examine the definitions used in the Code of Federal Regulations: Title 34 § 600.2:

**Current Correspondence and Distance Education Definitions**

**Correspondence course:** (1) A course provided by an institution under which the institution provides instructional materials, by mail or electronic transmission, including examinations on the materials, to students who are separated from the instructor.

Interaction between the instructor and student is limited, is not regular and substantive, and is primarily initiated by the student.
Correspondence courses are typically self-paced.

(3) A correspondence course is not distance education.

**Distance education** means education that uses one or more of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (4) of this definition to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support *regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor*, either synchronously or asynchronously. The technologies may include—

(1) The internet;

(2) One-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices;

(3) Audio conferencing; or

(4) Video cassettes, DVDs, and CD–ROMs, if the cassettes, DVDs, or CD–ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with any of the technologies listed in paragraphs (1) through (3) of this definition. vi

The main distinction of what constitutes a sanctioned online course is the communication between students and instructor. It must be “regular and substantive” and initiated primarily by the instructor.

The communication between students and instructor is a given in traditional education: the students and the instructor are in the same room, at regular times, and for a specified duration. In online courses, this is not the case. The amount of communication and interactivity is largely an instructor decision and is often reserved as a professional decision. Yet, research indicates that frequent communication is one component of online pedagogy.

Online courses require much greater faculty involvement and interaction with students. Faculty teaching online courses report a higher level of interaction between themselves and their students than they do in the classroom. The new technology-driven courses apparently will have equal or greater need for human interaction, not less (p. 19). v

If a professor did not show up for a face-to-face course or did come, but didn’t talk and declined to answer any student questions, there would be repercussions. Yet, when the same thing happens in an online course, the student can have little recourse. The institution *must* support and educate faculty in the expectations of online learning and ensure that students in the course are being served according to the law.
RATIONALE 3: INSTRUCTION AND ACTIVITY IN ONLINE COURSES MUST BE EQUIVALENT TO FACE-TO-FACE COURSES

Institutional credit is determined by the credit hour.

Federal Definition of Credit Hour: the minimum amount of work that is an institutionally established equivalency that is not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or equivalent hours of instruction. For this definition one hour of instruction is a standard 50 minutes of class time.

On-line and hybrid course: One distance learning or hybrid class credit is defined as: an equivalent amount of instruction and student work leading to equivalent learning outcomes, as required for an on-campus class.

WNMU sets the credit hour, also, at 50 minutes a week (p. 46). This is widely accepted in face-to-face courses, but in online courses, there is much speculation about “equivalency.” How does an institution maintain the rigor of online courses in which there is no face-to-face time?

Because online learning is a completely different medium, standard course assignments cannot simply be uploaded into a shell. A typical course is automatically losing the weekly three hours of required face-to-face instruction. Those hours must be replaced with modified content, activity, and interaction to remain equivalent.

This is why the accepted standard in online courses is that they be prepared and mostly completed before a semester starts. When students look at a face-to-face course, they see the structure (M-W-F, 1:00 – 1:50 PM). The expectation is clear that the course will involve that time commitment. When an online course begins, that same structure should be evident in other ways (content chunked or blocked throughout the semester, a proposed pacing guide, indications of assignments and quizzes). It is often a given that instructors will decide what and how to teach each face-to-face session as the course evolves. In online courses, instructors still have some latitude to adapt content and pace. However, the “structure” of the semester must be present when the course starts in the same way that a schedule of classes is ready in a traditional course.

With many online instructors untrained and unprepared in online pedagogy, the added requirements of modifying content for an online course must be taught, supported, and evaluated to verify institutional and federal compliance. The federal government regulates federal financial aid through institutional compliance; accreditation agencies examine the vigor of programs and competencies. It is the institution’s responsibility to ensure that online courses meet federal standards.
CONCLUSION

The institution has a right and a responsibility to review and encourage improvement in online courses. The evaluation, training, and process must be tailored to online learning pedagogy and process and support instructors who develop and teach online courses.

---

6 Electronic Code of Federal Regulations Title 34 § 600.2 Retrieved from http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecfr&sid= eae25fc4b9f731500e52e49c92e1cd56&rgn=div5&view=text&node=34:3.1.3.1.1&idno=34