Moving Towards Quality Online Courses

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According to the 2011 SLOAN-C Survey of Online Learning, approximately one-third of all students in higher education take at least 1 online class.[1] This represents a 10% annual growth rate that far exceeds the overall growth rate in higher education. While the rate of students taking online classes has continued to increase since 2003, concerns regarding relative quality of online courses and faculty acceptance persist.[1] One-third of all academic leaders believe that online education is inferior to face-to-face instruction. Likewise, academic leaders perceive their faculty acceptance of online education to be relatively low since the inception of the survey in 2003.[1] Therefore, educators must attend to issues of quality when developing online courses. In this column, I will provide information related to Quality Matters™ as a resource for developing quality online courses.

QUALITY MATTERS™ OVERVIEW

Quality Matters™ (QM) is a faculty-centered, collegial, peer review process designed to certify the quality of online and blended courses.[2] MarylandOnline developed Quality Matters™ through a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Higher Education (FIPSE) grant from 2003-2006. Quality Matters™ is now a not-for-profit subscription service that provides tools and training for institutions and individuals interested in quality assurance in online and blended courses. The level of intuitional subscription dictates the cost of professional development workshops and course reviews.

Quality Matters™ offers numerous tools to help instructors evaluate their online courses and build high quality online courses based on current research and best practices. The foundation of the Quality Matters™ is their rubric, comprised of 8 general standards and 41 specific standards.[2] The 8 general standards are:

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Learner Interaction and Engagement
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility

The 41 specific standards are used to evaluate the instructional design of the online course. The rubric does not evaluate instructional delivery. For example, general standard 1.1 states, "Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components."[3 (p. 1)]

While the Quality Matters™ rubric is geared toward evaluating online course design, it is also an excellent professional development tool. An instructor interested in developing an online course can use the rubric during the course development process as a checklist to ensure his course design is based on the latest research findings and best practices. The Quality Matters™ rubric can be downloaded at http://www.qmprogram.org/files/QM_Standards_2011-2013.pdf. The research findings that support the Quality Matters™ standards can be downloaded at http://www.qmprogram.org/lit-review-2011-2013-rubricpdf/download/QM%20Lit%20Review%20for%202011-2013%20Rubric.pdf.

THE QUALITY MATTERS™ COURSE REVIEW PROCESS

After an online course is developed and delivered at least 1 time, the instructor can pursue Quality Matters™ certification of the course. The course review process is conducted by 3 Quality Matters™ trained peer reviewers. The reviewers evaluate the course independently against the rubric. If the course earns at least 85% of the total points, the course will receive Quality

Matters™ recognition. The peer review process is collegial and is delivered in the spirit of faculty development. In the event the course does not meet the Quality Matters™ standards upon initial review, the course developer is given an opportunity to make revisions to the course. The course review process takes 4-6 weeks to process and course developers are given up to 20 weeks to make course amendments. For more information on preparing a course for Quality Matters™ review visit http://www.qmprogram.org/reviews/preparing.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

If you have never developed an online course, Quality Matters™ professional development programs are exceptional. My experience with Quality Matters™ started as a peer reviewer, followed by receiving Quality Matters™ recognition for 1 of my courses, and now serving as a Master Reviewer. Although your institution may not be a Quality Matters™ subscriber, there are many ways for you to become involved with the service. Completing the Peer Reviewer training will give you an appreciation for the rubric and course review process. If you are only interested in using the rubric to develop your course, you may be interested in the "Applying the QM Rubric" workshop.   For more information on Quality Matters™ visit http://www.qualitymatters.org.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following list of resources provide more information on Quality Matters™ and other rubrics for online instruction.

- Overview and Introduction to the Quality Matters™ Program.
  http://www.qmprogram.org/files/QM%20Overview%20 2011.pdf

- SLOAN-C Effective Practices
  http://sloanconsortium.org/effective

- Rubric for Online Instruction – California State University Chico
  http://www.csuchico.edu/celt/roi/

- How Interactive are YOUR Distance Courses? A Rubric for Assessing Interaction in Distance Learning
  http://www.westga.edu/~distance/roblyer32.html

REFERENCES

1. Allen IE, Seaman S. Going the distance: online education in the United States. Wellesley, MA: Babson Research Group; 2011.
2. Quality Matters Higher Education Program Rubric. Available at: http://www.qmprogram.org/rubric. Accessed December 11, 2011.
3. Quality Matters Rubric Standards 2011-2013 edition with assigned point values. Available at: http://www.qmprogram.org/files/QM_Standards_2011-2013.pdf.   Accessed December 29, 2011.

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