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# Factors in High Quality Distance Learning Courses

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*Joseph McClary*  
*Liberty University*  
[joe@edutegrity.com](mailto:joe@edutegrity.com)

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## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to examine factors that contribute to high quality distance learning courses and how to overcome barriers to offering them. For the purposes of this report, high quality equates to courses that receive high scores on student satisfaction surveys and other benchmarks that measure student performance.

Corry (2008) suggests there are several major components to consider when evaluating the quality of a distance learning course which are: "(1) course design, (2) content, (3) the instructor and (4) support systems" (p. 1). Corry's (2008) framework provides an excellent means by which to begin evaluating the research because most any component of a distance learning course falls into one of these four categories. In a separate report by Husson (2002) on quality measures in distance learning, we find a similar framework which suggests course development, faculty, assessment, support services, and technology (p. 253-259). "When issues of quality are raised regarding Internet-based distance learning, the answers continuously come back to recognizing the needs of students and finding effective ways to facilitate the learning process" (Husson, 2002, p. 260).

The research by Corry (2008) and Husson (2002) generally qualify the areas that deserve focus when evaluating online courses and provide a framework on which this paper is based.

## **Course Design**

Course design is a complex topic. Numerous methods of instructional design exist and the effectiveness of each can vary. The purpose here is to identify common trends across existing research that provide strong evidence of course design principles that contribute to a quality distance learning course.

Elias (2010) presents eight universal instructional design principles of quality distance learning courses. The eight universal instructional design principles include (p.148):

1. **Equitable use.** Equitable use involves ensuring content is available to all learners. Implications for this standard call for developers to go the extra mile in course development to include features such as scripts, closed captioning, or other accessibility features. Developers that desire to take shortcuts in course design often bypass inclusion of accessibility features to save time and money. Nevertheless, ethical course design calls for a commitment toward equitable use.

2. Flexible use. Flexible use involves offering content in multiple formats. For example, web browsers such as Apple's Safari® do not support Adobe® Flash. It is therefore important to make content accessible in a secondary manner that would not commit a student to accessing content in an overly proprietary technical environment. This is of course unless the course orientation specifically calls for a specific platform that will be used in delivering the education.
3. Simple and intuitive. Designing simple and intuitive course experiences is more complex than it sounds. For example, popular learning management systems like Blackboard® can be used to create high quality course experiences as well as under-par and confusing ones. In other words, it would be like a carpenter who owns high quality tools but does not use them correctly and builds a faulty home. It is generally a good practice across institutions of higher learning to commit to a single learning management system, and then develop a common course layout across most all of the courses offered in it. That does not mean instructional strategies or assignments cannot be vastly different between courses. However, what it does mean is that students do not have to relearn how to use multiple management systems when they take courses. Institutions of higher learning should also seek some standard approach to structuring the work in the online environment. From the authors consulting experience with academic institutions, schools that have disparate distance learning systems across departments are especially prone to creating an online environment that is less than simple or intuitive. For example, a college of business chooses one platform for their online education, while the school of social sciences at the same institution chooses another. Colleges and universities that do not have a single vision for what their distance learning initiatives should look like have departments going different directions with variable levels of quality. In addition, instructional design philosophy across departments can sacrifice the efficiencies involving economies of scale for support, student, and faculty training. If departments desire to use disparate delivery systems, there should be a quality rationale that is integrated with the institutions larger vision for its distance learning initiatives.
4. Perceptible information. Perceptible information involves enhancing content with descriptors, captions and transcriptions. For example, if an instructor is covering a complex topic in a video, it is beneficial for the content to also be in a transcript so that the content can be assimilated by the student offline. Providing perceptible information involves not only accommodating accessibility but providing means for alternative access for the benefit of students with different learning modalities.
5. Tolerance for error. Tolerance for error provides students the opportunity to easily correct errors. For example, good courses allow for students a means to collaborate regarding work that needs to be resubmitted in accordance with course policies. Another major step institutions have taken toward improving their tolerance for error involves centralized authentication services. With centralized authentication services (CAS), students have one username and password for all of the school's web-based services. Prior to the CAS movement, students would have been required to have separate usernames and passwords for student services such as registration, business office, library, and career center access. Having a CAS dramatically improves tolerance for managing student account information and authentication services across multiple web applications used by the institution (Jasig, 2013, p. 1). Students now better enjoy the luxury of spending additional time on course work as opposed to account management issues.
6. Low physical and technical effort. Extraneous cognitive load placed on students involving courseware or the delivery system should be minimized (Rikers, 2006, p. 359). Incorporating browser checks to ensure functionality help in this regard. In addition, usability testing, clear and consistent design, and assistive technologies also allow students to dedicate more cognitive focus on content and the learning process as opposed to the learning environment itself.

7. Community of learners and support. Good course design incorporates group learning and employs technology to facilitate those interactions at a distance. In addition, using multiple methods of communication enhances engagement.
8. Instructional climate. Elias (2010) suggests instructors, "make contact and stay involved. Push regular reminders and questions to students and pull in learner-generated content" (p. 149). One thread that runs consistently through research studies is that interaction is a vital element in the instructional process. Course design and instructors bear a responsibility to engage students in a meaningful way.

In addition to the eight principles listed, one of the most important principles remaining is that good distance learning courses are evaluated regularly. Simsonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek (2012) provide a quality framework for what must be evaluated in a distance learning course. Simsonson et al. (2012), state good distance learning courses evaluate:

"(1) reactions (did they like it?), (2) learning (did they learn it?), (3) transfer (will they use it?), (4) results (will it matter?), and (5) return on investment (did it pay for itself and contribute to the bottom line?)" (p. 349). This framework for course evaluation leads to a well rounded and thorough approach for improvement.

### **Course Content**

There are several indicators of quality content which among the most obvious include ensuring it is up-to-date and relevant. In regard to content relevancy, every module of content in the course should revolve around specific course objectives. Students should not be left to wonder how content is supposed to relate to the course objectives. A good distance learning course leaves no ambiguity in the students mind regarding how content applies to objectives. In addition, good courses have a variety of resources that support the concepts taught in the course over all.

Another major characteristic of quality content is whether or not it is reusable. Institutions of higher learning have found that reusing content is an efficient means by which to develop online programs. Teams of instructors, leveraging the strengths of each person, can develop outstanding curriculum that is offered uniformly to all students in a particular program. An advantage to this approach is that as the course is implemented, content is not differentiated in terms of the overall curriculum or topics covered. For institutions that want to leverage the economies of scale, reuse of content is mandatory. The Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) and similar models for structuring content into reusable objects have grown in prevalence. Vendors of distance learning products such as Articulate®, Captivate®, Camtasia®, Blackboard® and numerous others have found that to be competitive, they must accommodate a standard for developing and assimilating reusable content objects into different learning systems.

### **Course Instructor**

"The role of the online distance learning instructor is ambiguous and often ill defined" (Easton, 2003). Even worse, a popular myth associated with distance learning courses is that instructors are not needed at all. Research has put this myth to rest. For example, Zirkin and Sumler (1995) examined the effects of interactivity and learning. Their research concluded that, a positive relationship between the level of course interactivity and student learning and satisfaction. "The weight of evidence from the research reviewed was that increased student involvement by immediate interaction resulted in increased learning as reflected by test performance, grades, and student satisfaction" (p. 101). In addition, the International Distance Education Certification Center (2001) suggests that instructors provide an important and necessary role in engaging students and providing important interactive learning experiences (p. 12).

In addition to providing interaction, quality distance learning instructors provide more than general oversight of students navigating through the course. Instructors should engage students on a more personal level.

Maybery, Reupert, Patrick, & Chittleborough (2009) reported that, "on the whole, the majority of students reported the need for distance instructors to provide a personal presence, describing this presence in terms of being engaging, approachable, understanding, patient, and passionate about the subject" (p. 53).

As distance learning becomes more ubiquitous, instructors and school administrators should not lose sight of how to personally and appropriately engage students. For example, the author of this report completed a distance learning graduate course through a large accredited academic institution. The instructor for the course graded assigned papers, however provided no substantive feedback regarding the topic of the course. The small amount of feedback the instructor did provide was based solely on writing style requirements and nothing regarding the course content as related to the objectives. In addition, students were left to themselves in discussion postings. Conversations ended up wandering off topic and being of little educational value. Regional accreditation entities require that instructors have experience in the topic to be qualified to instruct courses. This almost universal requirement by accrediting bodies implies instructors should engage students on course content, not only on ancillary issues not directly related to the course objectives. Good distance learning instructors are able to knowledgably engage students on the mechanics of writing style and the topic they are instructing.

Quality distance learning instructors related provide feedback that would indicate that the instructor has read the student's work. For example, instructors may write that the student had completed the requirements for the task and provide specific comments about the work itself. Good instructors will provide necessary feedback on the style, topic, and content of the assignment. Quality feedback provides indication the instructor has thoroughly considered the students work and develops a more quality personal connection between the student and instructor. For example, a good instructor might state that he enjoyed reading a section of a student's paper and liked the examples the student provided to support their assertions. Good distance learning instructors will not provide ambiguous or overly generic feedback. Engagement with unambiguous feedback has also been shown to increase motivation for students and contribute to their success (Maybery, Reupert, Patrick, & Chittleborough, 2009, p. 53).

One issue of concern the author has observed after working with hundreds of distance learning organizations is that online instructors can have a tendency to over commit themselves professionally and consequently minimize their own expectations during a distance learning course. When instructors are considered for a teaching position, interview questions regarding other professional commitments should not be considered out of bounds. What may be better is to clearly communicate expectations for the instructors in a policy statement.

"Over the past two decades, the role and function of the instructor has changed drastically due to economic, technological, and education factors... therefore, there is a growing need to offer better quality online teacher training to current and potential online instructors to better enable these instructors to meet the ever-changing need of their online learning populations" (Barrett, 2010, p. 17).

Finally, educational institutions offering quality distance learning courses assist traditional classroom faculty to make the transition online if such a transition is necessary. Transitioning from the classroom to online course delivery is often not easy because the skills needed for teaching in the classroom can be different from those required in the online environment. Instructors who are fulfilled by presenting live in front of a class may be disappointed by the isolation or different learning expectations and strategies used in distance learning. Quality online courses have instructors who have adequately trained to teach at a distance.

## **Support Systems**

Good distance learning courses result from institutions that provide quality course support systems for students and instructors. Corry (2008) suggests support systems can be divided into three different areas. Academic support, administrative support, and technical support (p. 90). Academic support involves instructors providing

substantive engagement and feedback for course activities. Administrative support involves things such as financial aid, advising, registrar services etc. For schools using technical systems to deliver education, it is not a matter of whether a student will have problems; it is a matter of *when* they will have problems. Academic, administrative, and technical support services should be evaluated regularly as a part of the course evaluation. In addition, evaluation data should be made available to the appropriate stakeholders to ensure accountability and ongoing improvement.

Research also reveals consequences for not providing adequate support or training for faculty. "Institutions failing to develop an adequate faculty and student support infrastructure will eventually encounter significant problems" (Rogers, 2009, p. 2002). Instructors must be prepared to use the tools available for distance learning courses. From the author's experience, lack of faculty training on distance learning platforms and instructional design can result in fragmentation of delivery systems and instructional strategies and expectations deployed by the institution. Institutions without a singular vision for distance learning may have inter-organizational departments developing their own disparate plans on how to offer distance education. This may lead to institutions reinventing a number of different services and procedures within the organization. For example, a college of business may use Blackboard® because the instructors have used it before. In contrast, the instructors in the school of humanities use Skype because those instructors are not familiar with the capability of Blackboard®. This non-uniformity has disadvantages including lack of the economies of scale in system licensing, disparate training programs for faculty, different course design requirements and strategies, different systems for students to learn etc. In situations such as this, lack of an institutional vision for distance learning is usually at the center of the problem. If disparate delivery systems are to be used, there should be a strong objective behind the decision.

### **Overcoming Major Barriers to Offering Quality Distance Learning Courses**

Perhaps one of the best ways to evaluate good distance learning courses is to consider how the institutions have overcome the major barriers to offering them. Simonson, Schlosser, & Orellana (2011) list the ten most substantial barriers institutions have to overcome to offer quality distance learning programs. The barriers are presented in their rank order (p. 130).

1. Increased time commitment. Distance learning courses may very well take longer for instructors to manage than traditional classroom courses. Quality courses are facilitated by trained instructors who know how to maintain the quality of the course and not be overwhelmed by new requirements and loads they may not be used to.
2. Lack of funds to implement distance learning programs. Budgetary constraints do not go away with distance learning. Unless the program can take advantage of the economies of scale and earn a return on investment that is greater than or equal to the development and delivery cost, distance learning programs can easily lose money.
3. Organizational resistance to change. Institutions with highly independent departmental turf may find it difficult to work collaboratively with other departments or institutional service centers to bring quality education online. Good distance learning courses result from a team effort between different parties across the institution.
4. Lack of vision for distance education in the organization. Quality distance learning programs result from an overall institutional vision. Quality standards are also passed down from the leadership of the institution to the different departments providing distance learning.
5. Lack of support staff to help course development. To address this challenge, academic institutions are deploying centers for teaching and learning (CTL). For example, the University of Texas (2010) launched its Center for Teaching and Learning in 2010. As a proclamation of its mission the University provost said,

“the CTL will work closely with colleges, departments, students and individual faculty to support other strategic initiatives that advance educational excellence. CTL will aid the

incorporation of instructional technology and new media into courses to support educational excellence, promote engaged and critical inquiry models of teaching and learning, provide increased attention to the development of foundational academic skills and core conceptual knowledge, improve the specification and assessment of learning outcomes and promote student success” (p. 1).

An analysis of other centers for teaching and learning reveal strikingly similar objectives to those of the University of Texas. CTLs are helping raise the standards for quality distance learning across the institution and providing faculty with valuable resources to provide quality distance learning.

6. Lack of institutional strategic planning for distance education is another major barrier for quality distance learning. Strategic planning requires leadership at every level of the organization. Not having an institutional plan for distance learning program may lead to fragmentation of initiatives that will yield mixed results across programs.
7. Slow pace of implementation. Course design on certain topics requires regular change. For example, a course on the American Civil War may not require updating as frequently as per se a course on technology or current events. Systems must be in place to ensure content and instructional design is reviewed and updated regularly.
8. Faculty compensation. Given some distance learning courses can take longer to facilitate than the classroom equivalent, attracting qualified instructors can be a challenge. To address this issue, many large institutions are leveraging larger numbers of adjunct instructors to help meet demands. Adjunct instructors usually cost less than maintaining full-time faculty and used just-in-time to facilitate periods of varying course demand.
9. Difficulty keeping up with technological changes. Good distance learning courses use relevant and current technology. Upgrades, new features, improved capability are rolled out regularly within high quality distance learning tools. Organizational culture should promote an ongoing and unceasing commitment to preparing faculty and students to continually take the next steps forward.
10. Lack of infrastructure or support. Distance learning courses are as only as good as the infrastructure and staff that support them. For example, one institution the author consulted for provides several cloud based web applications to assist instructors in facilitating online courses. However, no onsite training or support is available for the faculty. As a result, the applications are only used by a minority of instructors who have taken the time to train themselves. The administrators who procured the applications suggested the programs were intuitive enough for faculty to learn without training. Interestingly, leadership at the institution later found that the primary issue behind the low number of instructors adopting the tools was not the instructors' ability to learn the software applications. The primary issue causing lack of adoption was the instructors not knowing that the programs were available and how they served to achieve the course objectives.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to examine factors that contribute to high quality distance learning courses. Distance learning is here to stay. Educational institutions should have a vision for what type of distance learning programs they will implement and the standards they will hold to. Institutions will master distance learning, or in some cases, distance learning trends and demands will master the school. Essentially, educational institutions should be proactive in providing leadership that serves as a proverbial light house in which their departments, colleges, and schools can look to.

In addition, from the author's experience, educational institutions must communicate to course developers and program leaders what are acceptable rates of return on distance learning programs. While great instructors are

often not focused on the bottom line of whether a course pays for itself, the reality is that courses should be self-sufficient and reap a return for the institution's investment unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

Regarding overcoming barriers to offering quality distance learning, each of the barriers and strategies to overcome them listed can be addressed in proper planning and evaluation of the course. Occasionally, a disproportionate amount of attention can be given to facilitation of the distance learning program while the planning and evaluation phases are neglected.

Another ongoing challenge that institutions will face in developing and offering quality distance learning courses is finding quality faculty. The level of engagement instructors are prepared to facilitate and caliber of their credentials will continue to be a differentiating factor in gauging the quality of a course and the institution offering it. As capable as many instructors are, institutions must not leave instructors to their own devices to set institutional expectations. Instructors must be guided by good policy, training experiences, and expectations set forth by the institution.

### **About The Author**

Joseph McClary spent more than a decade leading two major distance learning standards bodies, the ARELLO Distance Education Certification Program and the International Distance Education Certification Center (IDECC), which regulate distance learning standards for the United States real estate and appraisal industries. In 2001, McClary was named the founding executive director of IDECC which sets instructional design standards for distance learning and certifies courses offered for professional credit. McClary has consulted with more than 350 distance learning providers to assist them in meeting instructional design standards and achieving certifications for quality. In 2008, McClary co-wrote and founded the IDECC Certified Distance Education Instructor Program that certifies approximately a thousand distance learning instructors across the globe. McClary holds a Master of Arts Degree in Education from George Washington University and has been a certified middle school and high school teacher. He has also taught at as an adjunct instructor of education at Faulkner University. McClary currently owns his own consulting firm EduTegrity which provides instructional development coaching, educational program development and non-profit management consulting. He can be reached at Joe@EduTegrity.com.

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