

What Is Online Course Quality?

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What Is Quality?

In his classic popular work *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig (1984) observes:

Quality -- you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others -- but what's the "betterness"? -- So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (pp. 163-164)

In everyday life, the word “quality” is used in at least two distinct ways. First, we use quality to refer to a gradation of excellence embodied by an object (or person, experience, entity, etc.). For instance, we might comment that a store carries “high quality” merchandise or that a performance features “top quality” musicians. Similarly, we imply the converse when we say that a restaurant “isn’t very good [in quality].” This use of quality might be conceptualized as being measured on an ordinal scale. That is, we can envision low, medium, and high levels of quality. Second, quality can also refer to the distinguishing characteristics of an object; what it is that distinguishes one object from another. This is true both within and between classes of objects. That is, we perceive that apples and oranges are *qualitatively* different, and with educated palettes, we can come to recognize a myriad of differences between even the most closely related apples. In this sense, quality exists on a nominal scale. It might be argued that the less sophisticated the object, the more feasibly one can speak of its greater or lesser (ordinal) quality, while more complex entities require nominal classification by virtue of their unique combination of qualities. Or, more pointedly, less sophisticated *perceptions* of an object lead to ordinal usage while more nuanced insights result in a nominal view. To an extent, then, the under-appreciated is commoditized while the understood appreciates in value. (See Pine and Gilmore (1999) for their framework of analogous relationships within economics.)

Who Cares About Online Course Quality?

These observations also hold true when considering quality in the online courses offered by higher educational institutions. It is not uncommon to speak, in generic terms, of

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“good” or “bad” online courses, without specifying the attributes that contribute to these designations. Neophytes may do this because they have no basis for a more differentiated description, while those intimately acquainted with online courses may use such labels as a shorthand reference. However, as seasoned online course practitioners know, there are countless nuances that distinguish one course from another (and, for that matter, that distinguish one semester’s offering of a course from another semester’s offering of the same course). Until such time as patterns within these characteristics are identified and associated with positive or negative outcomes, though, it is difficult to justify labeling an online course with such simplistic descriptors. Nevertheless, administrators and faculty feel pressured from time to time to compare one course to another or one instructor to another in their attempts to ensure that online courses produce various desirable outcomes (e.g., sufficient enrollment, adequate retention, academic rigor, student success, student satisfaction) at rates comparable to face-to-face courses (as if meeting face-to-face is, itself, a mark of excellence) or to the level of satisfaction of an accrediting agency. (Students might be motivated to make such comparisons between course modalities as well, but, undoubtedly, the qualities in which some students are interested will vary markedly from the interests of faculty and administrators.) Thus, there is likely always to be some degree of comparison since it seems that there is always someone concerned with whether this course is “good enough,” and it is certainly appropriate to ensure that baseline acceptability is met across specific domains. If this were not enough, some individual faculty, motivated by their own enlightened self-interest, look for guidance in determining what improvements might be made to their courses. In either case, however, the question is whether we have justification for the judgments we make about online courses.

Accrediting bodies (e.g., [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools](#), [Western Association of Schools and Colleges](#), [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities](#), etc.) and education compact organizations (e.g., [Southern Regional Education Board](#), [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education](#), [Midwestern Higher Education Compact](#), etc.) have articulated broad requirements or statements of good practice for academic programs in higher education (including online courses). Such statements typically define levels of *minimum acceptability* for particular dimensions (e.g., curriculum and instruction, institutional context and mission, evaluation and assessment, etc.) of institutional offerings. While some statements have direct implications for what happens within courses, these guidelines are necessarily broad in order to facilitate compliance at the institutional level. Articulating analogous quality standards at the course level is difficult for at least three reasons. First, there is no one authoritative body that can (or is willing to) address minimum levels of acceptability for online learning in all its manifestations within the diversity of approaches found in even one state’s higher education institutions. Thus, there are no universal standards for online course quality. Second, if such standards *did* exist, it is difficult to create an evaluative tool which could be used consistently across all courses, programs, and institutions. Third, if such a tool were available, it is actually quite time consuming to evaluate an individual course. It is difficult to imagine an organization willing to commit to such an undertaking for all higher education institutions within its jurisdiction. As a result, specific standards



of online course quality have emerged not from traditional authoritative bodies but from for-profit companies (e.g., [WebCT's Exemplary Course Project](#), groups of institutions (e.g., [Quality Matters](#), or, more typically, from individual institutions. Most of these groups embed their standards in a review form (i.e., a checklist or rubric) and include a summative, ordinal rating. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Selected examples of online course standards

Title	URL
Quality Matters	http://www.qualitymatters.org
WebCT Exemplary Course Project	http://webct.com/exemplary
Online Course Evaluation Project	http://www.montereyinstitute.org/ocep.html
CSU Chico's Rubric for Online Instruction	http://www.csuchico.edu/celt/roi/
Michigan Virtual University's Standards for Quality Online Courses	http://standards.mivu.org/
Texas Education Agency's Investigating Quality of On-Line Courses	http://www.iqstandards.info/
Mountain Empire Community College's Online Course Quality Review Form	http://www.me.vccs.edu/forms/peer-review.pdf
Minnesota State Colleges and Universities' Evaluation of Quality in Online Courses	http://www.oit.mnscu.edu/mitss/peerreview1.htm
Florida Gulfcoast University's Principles of Online Design	http://www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign

Limitations of Online Course Standards

Sets of standards such as those described above do have their limitations vis-à-vis online course quality. These limitations have to do with the prescriptiveness, credibility, scope, and atomism of such standards groupings. Each of these will be addressed in turn.

It is the nature of standards to *prescribe* how things should be. However, it is challenging to formulate prescriptive statements in such a manner as to fit *all* contexts which give rise to online courses. For instance, the statement, “evaluating and validating Web-based information in completing assignments” certainly applies to many online courses, but if a course does not feature assignments that require students to consult Web-based resources, this standard is obviously irrelevant. Also, in prescribing what should be, there is a tendency to focus on minimum acceptability to the exclusion of excellence or innovation. Review instruments which incorporate actual rubrics (e.g., [CSU Chico's Rubric for Online Instruction](#)) mitigate this limitation by presenting upper-end requirements as a counterpoint to the “bare minimums,” but one has to question whether it is likely that the



usefully finite number of categories in such rubrics will account for all manner of innovations.

The provenance of standards affects their credibility. For instance, most online course standards are written by small groups of individuals with some personal experience with online teaching and learning. Although there is nothing wrong with a group's expertise serving as the basis for such standards, it is not uncommon for online course standards to be accepted uncritically, with no recognition that they arose from a particular context with its own idiosyncratic needs. Interestingly, there are numerous instances in which standards from one review instrument have been copied-and-pasted into new review instruments as if the standards are axiomatic. There are rarely any explicit connections made between standards and theory-based or research-based frameworks. ([Quality Matters](#) does include some literature citations, but it does not purport to be based on a cohesive theoretical or research framework.) If online course standards are to have enduring significance in addressing quality, they must be credible.

Nearly all sets of online course standards bear the imprint of an overt instructional design emphasis (e.g., instructional objectives, constructivist influence, technology-dominated, etc.). While, of course, it is reasonable for this field to leave its mark on what is deemed acceptable in online courses, such an emphasis typically leads to a focus on the designed environment of the course *to the exclusion of* the experience of instructors and students in the teaching/learning process. The problems this causes can perhaps more easily be seen if we look for an analogous set of relationships within a different setting. For instance, one can design and construct a building, a house, or a classroom. But such constructions are intended to support the lives of those who interact, who live, within their walls. While a tour of an unoccupied kindergarten classroom and an inventory of its resources might provide some indication of the nature of the teaching and learning that occur there, it is the *lived experiences* of the students and teachers, their actual interactions, in which teaching and learning are made manifest. Limiting the scope of online course quality to considerations of the designed environment results in a significant blind spot. This should be avoided.

The final limitation of online course standards to be presented here is the necessity for such standards to be atomistic. That is, online courses are viewed only as an aggregation of disparate parts, reducible to simple "should" statements. As discussed above, the activity of reviewing courses in any kind of collective way necessitates having a scalable process. This includes using a review instrument that is relatively quick to complete. However, it must be observed that, by their nature, atomistic approaches lend themselves to quantification, sums, and scores. Holistic approaches, by contrast, result in one, integrated complete-as-possible picture which is more difficult to quantify (i.e., nominal classification). Thus, it is unlikely for a simple course review instrument to reveal the complexities of an online course instructional experience, but, with the above caveats in mind, such an instrument is likely to reveal whether some agreed-upon minimum acceptability has been achieved. (By contrast, see the [Online Course Criticism Model](#) (Thompson 2005) for a holistic, non-standards-based, robust approach to evaluating



online courses. Further, the [Online Course Evaluation Project](#) provides a rare balance between most checklist-based reviews and the intensity of the criticism model.)

A Foundation for Considering Online Course Quality

While most sets of online course standards lack unifying frameworks, there are a group of constructs that may prove useful as a foundation for considering online course quality. These constructs were first united as a part of the Online Course Criticism Model (Thompson 2005); however, they can also be used to categorize any of the various sets of online course standards while addressing some of the limitations discussed above.

Schwab (1973) first introduced his construct of the four educational “commonplaces” (p. 509): learners, teacher, subject matter, and milieus (environmental contexts) over thirty years ago, but they are relevant today for demarcating those elements under consideration as contributors to online course quality. While subject matter should perhaps be left to discipline-specific subject matter experts, the remaining three commonplaces can be applied readily to any instructional context. It is difficult indeed to imagine any instruction that does not involve one or more learners, teachers, and a supporting context. These three commonplaces give rise to both the course environment (i.e., context) and the course experience (i.e., the interactions and perceptions of learner[s] and teacher[s]). In turn, the course environment and course experience are linked in one dynamic process. One can actually visualize these two online course elements as supporting each other in a continually reciprocal cycle. (See Figure 1.) While the designed course environment sets the stage for the interactions of the course experience, the manifestations of this experience in an online course (e.g., discussion postings, e-mail messages, automated quiz feedback, etc.) become *a part of* the environment. This enhanced environment then sets the stage for further interactions which again affect the environment and so forth in a recursive loop.

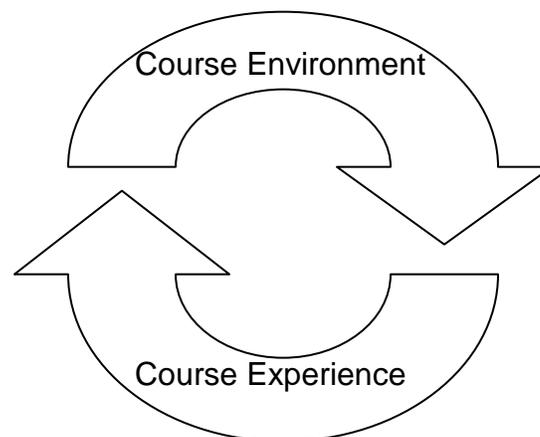


Figure 1. Relationship between course environment and course experience.

To complete the foundation for considering online course quality, Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces are joined with four additional constructs: Spectrum of Teaching Styles (Mosston and Ashworth 1990), Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Archer, and Anderson

2001), Learning Environment Facets (Perkins 1991), and Modular Reusability (Thompson 2005). The Spectrum of Teaching Styles and Community of Inquiry relate to Schwab’s commonplaces of students and teachers (the course experience), while Learning Environment Facets and Modular Reusability align with Schwab’s milieus (the course environment). (See Table 1.) Although the Spectrum of Teaching Styles considers the online course from the vantage point of the power relationship between instructor and students, Community of Inquiry views the online course as a series of teacher-learner interactions. Similarly, the Learning Environment Facets use five particular component elements to determine “general structure and style” (Perkins 1991, p. 18) in the course, while Modular Reusability views an online course as a “nested system of functions, each with its own lifecycle and implications for human interactions” (Thompson 2005, p. 93).

Table 2. Relationship of constructs to Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces

Constructs	Students	Teachers	Subject Matter	Milieus
Spectrum	X	X		
COI	X	X		
Facets				X
Reusability				X

In an earlier work (Thompson 2005) I explicate each of these latter four constructs as “lenses [that] illuminate and expand upon the commonplace elements” (p. 78). These four particular lenses were selected due to their fit with Schwab’s (1973) commonplaces, their independence from face-to-face instructional assumptions, and their lack of adherence to any one discipline area’s values (e.g., not limited to ideas promoted within a college of education). More detailed information on these lenses is presented in this earlier work (Thompson 2005, pp. 74-96).

When combined with themes found within typical online course standards, the intersection of these five constructs (i.e., Schwab’s [1973] commonplaces plus the latter four) can be reduced to the nine broadly prescriptive statements summarized in Table 2. These nine statements counteract the limitations of credibility and scope discussed above while also serving as a framework into which typical online course standards may be integrated. This framework provides a basis for quality judgments that transcends practitioner opinion and helps ensure that a consideration of quality in online courses includes a wider range of elements than most existing sets of standards. (By their very nature, though, these statements cannot completely neutralize the limitations of prescriptiveness or atomism articulated earlier.)

Table 3. Prescriptive online course framework statements and elaboration/examples

Statement	Elaboration/Examples
<i>Online Course Environment</i>	
1. The environment clearly communicates scope, sequence, and	Some examples are expectations/protocols for online interaction; assignments



length of learning activities to students while providing automated feedback on progress.	integrating objectives, readings, learning activities, and assessments; quizzes with automated feedback; and a student-viewable up-to-date grade book.
2. The environment integrates reputable subject matter content resources.	Some examples are text/graphic “modules,” online multimedia components, CD-ROM supplements, and Web links.
3. The environment provides tools for student communication/authoring.	Some examples are discussion boards, chat rooms, and whiteboards as well as specific software tools ranging from the ubiquitous to the esoteric.
4. The environment incorporates opportunities (real life or simulated) to apply course concepts or practice skills.	Some examples are simulations, tutorials, case studies, and authentic projects
5. The environment balances contextualization and reusability in all aspects.	That is, the course is neither so idiosyncratic as to require a reinvention of existing resources nor so standardized as to interfere with the organic interaction between instructors and students. Some examples are an internally consistent organizational structure, links to learner support resources, “stock” messages as the basis for personalization, and the incorporation of reusable learning objects.
<i>Online Course Experience</i>	
6. Instructors and students exchange substantive ideas related to course content.	Some examples are student-content interactions, student responses to discussion prompts, follow-up responses by instructors and students, instructor feedback on student work, and online group work.)
7. Instructors and students provide facilitation/guidance of the course experience.	In any course modality, the logistical role of answering procedural [non-content] questions and giving guidance is crucial. This is true even more than usual in the online context. While this role is typically filled by the instructor, it can also be shared with students as appropriate. Some examples are traditional teaching methods



	or instructional strategies adapted to the online environment, no-credit opportunities for students to practice with the technology prior to submitting work for a grade, and the establishment of “technical help” or other topics in which students are expected to take the lead.
8. Instructors and students represent themselves as “real people” in the course experience.	A crucial factor in forming a learning community in an online course is the degree to which the personalities of the individual students and instructor are projected. This may be manifested through individual photos, audio, video, or biographical statements. However, perhaps this is more powerfully demonstrated within the context of communications in which individuals share emotions and tell something of their lives while talking about some other topic.
9. Power roles of instructors and students are clear and consistent throughout the course experience.	While specific manifestations will depend upon the instructor’s teaching philosophy, the emphasis here is upon clarity and consistency of roles. However, some examples from a more egalitarian perspective are learning contracts, solicitation of feedback <i>from</i> students, alternative assignments from which students may choose, and cultivation of a learning community.

Online course quality, then, is complex. While online courses are comprised of various qualitatively different elements resulting in completely unique course environments/experiences, it is possible to identify some broad guidelines for what is desirable in online courses based on a theoretical foundation. It is likely that there will continue to be debate among experienced practitioners as to what constitutes “higher” levels of quality within each component element. However, there is hope that within individual departments or institutions, some traction will be found so that, unlike Pirsig, the spinning mental wheels will actually result in forward motion.



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