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Assessing the Distance Learning Experience

Abstract

Assessment for distance learning courses has always been a challenge because of security issues, and current accreditation assessment requirements have only compounded those challenges. Our paper reviews our experiences with evaluation and assessment in graduate distance learning courses come from several perspectives beginning with the construction of the course itself, our data collection on the perceptions of students taking the distance learning courses, and methods we have used to measure student learning. We hope to share with participants some of the software and tools we use and dialogue about the assessment problems we all encounter in the challenging arena of distance learning.

Rationale

The proliferation of distance learning courses and programs has compounded the need for comprehensive assessments that take into account areas required by accreditation bodies, such as student knowledge and skills, but also student perceptions of their distance learning experience, and assessments that must begin with the design of distance learning courses themselves.

To insure that a distance learning course is sufficiently rigorous and that it parallels the face-to-face course experience, assessments must be used from throughout the course design process as well as once the course is being offered. Our methods of formative assessment that we believe should take place during distance learning course design will be described. Conference participants can participate in this section by sharing problems they have encountered or solutions that have worked for them.

Once the course is being offered, assessments that allow student input on their perceptions of course degree of difficulty, level of interactivity, ease and frequency of communication with the instructor and with other students, and whatever problems they might be experiencing should be in place. Data from three difference distance learning courses will be reviewed and methods to use this data in curriculum evaluation and adjustment.

Traditional methods of assessment, that is, multiple choice exams, essays, projects and the like do transfer to the distance learning environment. Security issues that arise can be addressed with course management systems such as WebCT and tools like the Respondus LockDown Browser that give a measure of security for exams. These and other methods of measuring student learning will be demonstrated. Rubrics will be available that can be adapted for other courses.

Our approach is that assessment for distance learning courses must be multi-faceted and ongoing to collect information that can be used to affect curriculum development for current as well as future courses. Just as distance learning pedagogy requires expanded skill sets, so too does assessment in the distance learning environment.