

Quality Does Matter in Your University Online Course

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine student satisfaction with the Quality Matters design process that was incorporated into an online MBA organizational behavior class at a Midwestern private university.

Quality Matters (QM) is a nationally recognized, research based, peer-review process designed to certify the quality of online and hybrid courses. For an online course to qualify as a QM course, it must contain specific components in its overall design.

Four research questions were examined in this study:

1. Which QM design components did students find most useful in the course?
2. Was it easy to access assignments in the QM format?
3. Did students feel a sense of community with other students in the course?
4. How did the course compare to other courses that did not use the QM format?

The author's underlying purpose in doing this research was to determine whether this design process was effective and which specific aspects of the design were deemed as most and least useful to students.

Keywords: MBA students, online education, Quality Matters certification

INTRODUCTION

As online programs continue to grow in popularity at colleges and universities across the country, there needs to be standards which offer quality assurance for those courses. This past year, the Higher Learning Commission approved a full-online MBA Program for a Midwestern private university. In so doing, the administration and faculty wished to ensure that the experience would be one of quality and uniformity for its students. After thorough investigation of programs that could facilitate this process, it was the decision of all concerned to implement Quality Matters standards to the program. The Organizational Behavior class that participated in this study was among the first three courses offered with this format in the MBA program.

Quality Matters (QM) is a nationally recognized, research based, peer-review process designed to certify the quality of online and hybrid courses. Started in 2003 as a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant, QM has since become a not-for-profit, subscription-based service.

Faculty members use the QM rubric as a framework for the design of their online or hybrid courses. The rubric is a set of standards that research has shown contribute to the quality of an online or hybrid course. The rubric is then tested by a team of three trained peer reviewers to evaluate the design of the online or hybrid course.

QM is a continuous improvement model. Upon review, the course either will or will not yet meet expectations. If a course meets expectations, it is recognized on the QM website and permitted to display the QM logo. If a course does not yet meet expectations, the faculty member receives detailed feedback from the review team and has the opportunity to revise the course so that it does meet expectations.

The Quality Matters Program Mission is dedicated to promoting and improving the quality of online education and student learning through development of research-supported, best practice-based quality standards and appropriate evaluation tools and procedures. In addition to fostering institution acceptance and integration of QM standards into organizational effectiveness efforts, it provides faculty development training in the use of QM rubrics and other quality practices to improve the quality of online/hybrid courses (Quality Matters Program, 2011).

The Quality Matters Rubric and processes are as follows:

Continuous

- The Quality Matters process is designed to ensure that all reviewed courses will eventually meet expectations. The process is integral to a continuous quality improvement process.

Centered

- On research: The development of the rubric is based in national standards of best practice, the research literature, and instructional design principles.
- On student learning: The rubric and process are designed to promote student learning.
- On quality: The review sets a quality goal at the 85% level or better (courses do not have to be perfect but better than average).

Collegial

- A Quality Matters review is part of a faculty-driven, peer review process. The review process is intended to be diagnostic and collegial, not evaluative and judgmental.

Collaborative

- The review is based on collaboratively identified evidence found in the course rather than the personal preference of an individual reviewer.
- The review is flexible and not prescriptive (with many ways to meet each standard).
- The review team consists of three experienced online instructors as reviewers along with the course faculty developer. (Quality Matters Program, 2011)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online education is one of the most exciting enhancements to contemporary education. In response to enrollment demands, many institutions have been working on strategic plans to implement quality online programs (Kim & Bonk, 2006).

Computer-based learning studies have attempted to address the issue of quality in online learning. One of the largest studies dedicated to this topic was *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education*, commissioned by the National Education Association, the nation's largest professional association of higher education faculty, and Blackboard, a leading Internet education company (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). The study examined case studies of six colleges/universities that provided Internet-based degree programs. After a thorough review of current literature was conducted, twenty-four benchmarks were identified that assessed the role of institution, administration, faculty, and students that are essential to quality distance education (McGorry, 2003).

In the mid-1990s, The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Consortium suggested five pillars for a framework of measuring and improving an online program within an institution. The pillars were: Learning effectiveness, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, cost effectiveness, and access (Lorenzo & Moore, 2002).

In addition, two leaders in distance education, The American Distance Education Consortium (1999) and Pennsylvania State University also developed guidelines for online courses based upon the premise that the principles that govern face-to-face instruction are similar to Web-based environments.

Penn State faculty suggested the following recommendations and assessment factors: Enabling students to self-monitor progress, giving regular feedback to students, supporting peer learning and assessment, and designing self-assessment practices (McLoughlin & Luca, 2001).

There need to be specific objectives, outcomes, learner engagement, problem- and knowledge-based learning in quality online education. (McGorry, 2003).

Student satisfaction and learning were tied to quality in a study by Arbaugh (2000). The areas of perceived usefulness of the course, flexibility, interaction, student experience, and engagement were addressed in that study.

In a 2006 study by Shea, Li, and Pickett, it was suggested that “teaching presence and community” were two important ingredients to quality online education.

It should be noted that design elements are very important in the success of an online course. In a study by Zemsky and Massey (2004), it was stated that faculty often use standard PowerPoint slides and canned course management systems, which may not be the most effective or engaging ways to interact with students (Norton & Hathaway 2008). The design of the course and the assessment of that design are of paramount importance to the success of the course and the program.

In a survey conducted by Kim and Bonk (2006) regarding the predictions of how the quality of online learning would be measured in the future, it was found that the majority of the respondents felt that the best measure was a comparison of student achievement to similar classes in a F2F setting, while a much lesser percentage felt the course evaluation was the best measurement of quality in the course.

Traditionally, the evaluation has been positioned at the end of the course. In online teaching, however, the level of understanding that teachers, learners, and developers have can impact the ultimate effectiveness of the product. Therefore, a proactive evaluative system should be in place that will identify critical online learning factors that will better inform the planning, design, and development of resources (Sims, Dobbs, Hand, 2002). In doing so, planning activities are assessed against evaluation criteria that would normally be applied during “formative assessment.”

A plethora of performance assessments should be instituted by instructors for quality online instruction. The assessments should be aligned with course objectives and subject aims, and should enhance students’ vocational and disciplinary skills (Zheng & Smaldino, 2003). Assessment tools should include quality assignments, collaborative assignments, testing, etc. Learning outcomes should be measured through grades, deep learning, higher order thinking, critical thinking, or problem-solving skills (Yang & Cornelius, 2005).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions examined in this study included:

1. Which QM design components did students find most useful in the course?
2. Was it easy to access assignments in the QM format?
3. Did students feel a sense of community with other students in the course?
4. How did the course compare to other courses that did not use the QM format?

Data Sample

Eighteen MBA students were enrolled in an organizational behavior online course. The survey was administered to 18 students, of which 16 students responded. Age and gender variables were not studied, because the focus of this study was the QM format itself and how effective it was for all students, regardless of age or gender. It should be noted, however, that the results of the study reflect a nontraditional audience. The MBA student population consists of predominantly working adults.

Methodology and Procedure

The author implemented the QM components in an online MBA course in Organizational Behavior in the Spring of 2011. The learning management system that housed the course was ANGEL.

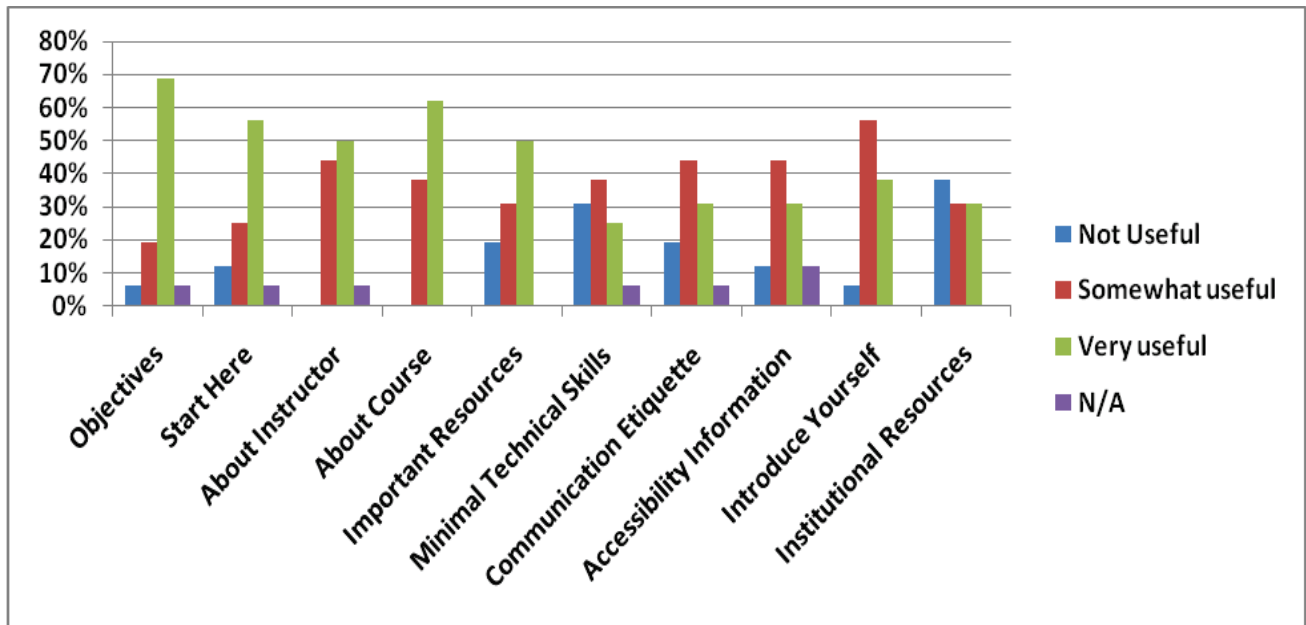
Since the author was interested in student feedback regarding the design and delivery of the course, a student survey was conducted at the end of the course on www.zoomerang.com regarding student views of the effectiveness of the QM format in their learning. Students were given a week to respond. This was a separate survey from the standard course evaluation given at course end. In particular, the question of interest was how the format of this course compared to other online courses the students have taken that were designed in a format that was not QM enhanced. The survey also asked students to rate the features they found most and least helpful in the QM format. The actual QM review process took place with external reviewers at the end of the semester.

Results of the Survey

The survey questioned the usefulness of specific components that appeared on the Course Home Page, Content Section, and Resources pages. Since the student sample used in the study was small, which causes a significant lack of power with respect to any statistical tests (i.e., only large differences on the various percentage differences in the responses could be found to be statistically significant), the researcher did not conduct statistical tests. Thus, only the *differences* in the various percentage differences in the responses will be reported.

The results of the survey are as follows:

Figure 1: Rate your usefulness of each of the QM components on the website.

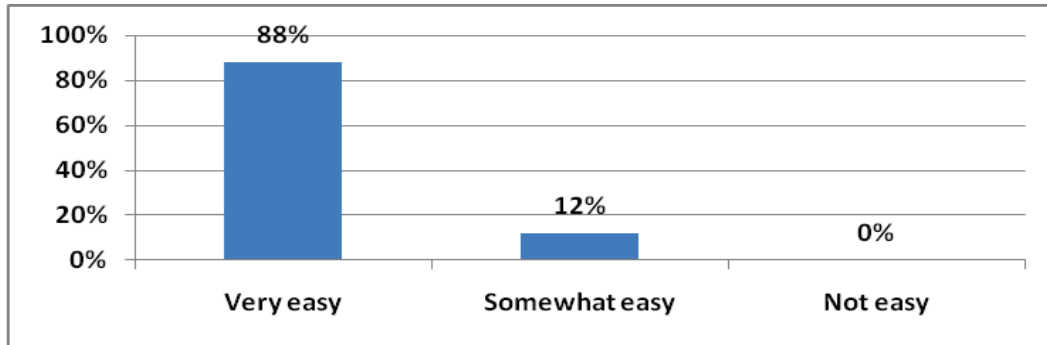


In Figure 1, the author notes that the *Objectives* section was seen as the most useful of all of the components on the website. These objectives were placed in each chapter folder along with chapter assignments. The second most useful component was the *About the Course* section, which appeared on the Home Page. Since this was a full-online course, this section provided an introduction to the scope of the course and how it would evolve. The *Start Here* component was rated third in usefulness. This section gave students the opportunity to view a video on the use of ANGEL in addition to links to vital resources for novices to online learning. In fourth place, the *About the Instructor* section and *Important Resources* sections appeared to also be of use to students.

Rated as somewhat useful were sections on *Introduce Yourself*, *Minimal Technical Skills Assistance*, *Communication Etiquette*, and *Accessibility Information*.

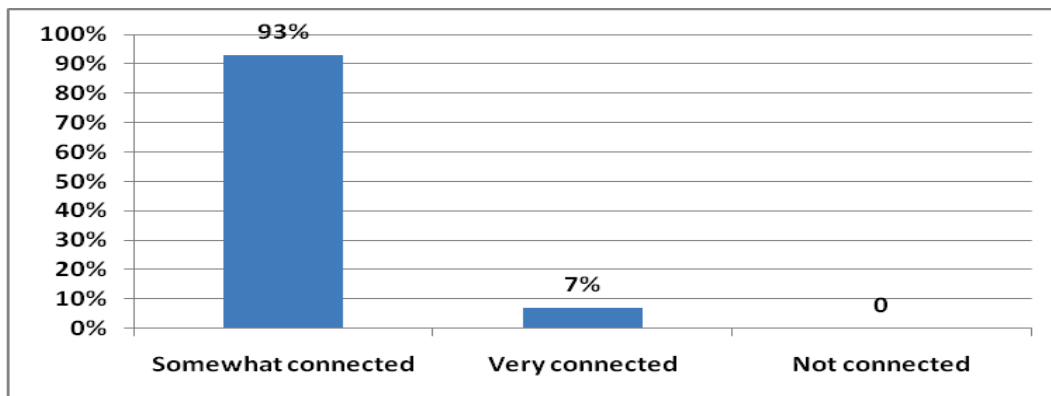
The students seemed to find the *Institutional Resources* section to be the least useful of all components.

Figure 2: Rate your ease in locating assignments in this course.



In Figure 2, one can see that the majority of students (88%) felt it was very easy to locate assignments in the course. Therefore, we can assume the QM design for this particular course was successful in this endeavor.

Figure 3: Rate your connectivity to other students in the class.



The results in Figure 3 were of some concern to the author, since most instructors want to ensure that their students feel a sense of *community* in the online experience. In tailoring the course to meet all of the various QM criteria, it is the author's feeling that perhaps a certain amount of spontaneity and focus on "community" may have been minimized in this course, while focusing on the details of the design, since the course was up for review by an external team at the end of the semester.

When comparing Figure 3 with Figure 1, however, we see a similarity. It is noted that only 58% of the students found the *Introduce Yourself* component "somewhat useful." Therefore, it appears that students were more interested in getting to the assignments than getting to know one another. The author observed that this particular class did not seem as "interested" in connecting with other students as other online courses have been in the past, despite numerous efforts by the instructor.

After viewing these results, this author has added team projects and more *synchronous* discussion to the course for implementation in future classes.

Figure 4: Have you taken other online courses at the same time or previous to taking this online course?

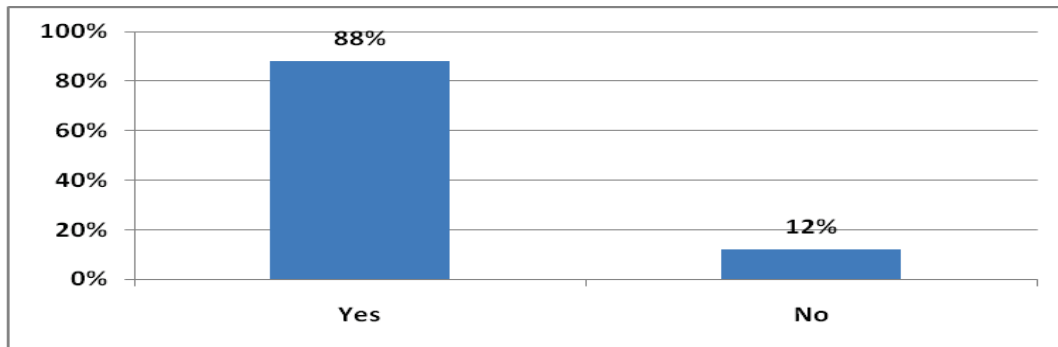
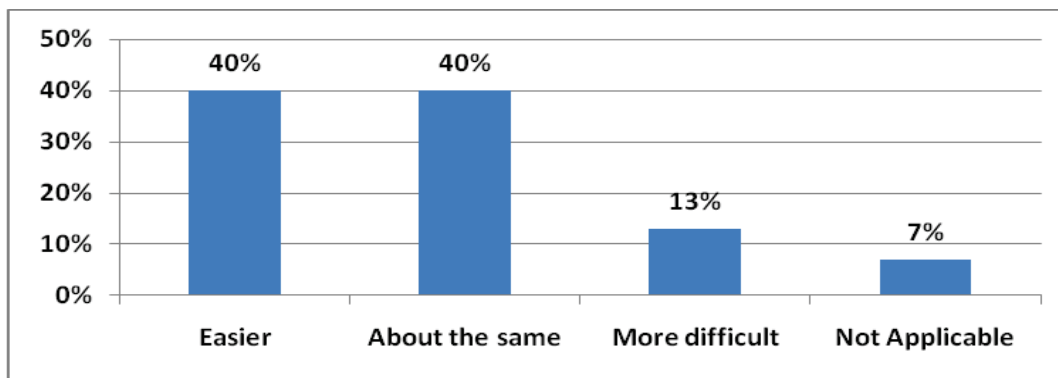


Figure 4 shows that 88% of the students who took this QM course were either taking another online course at the same time or had taken online courses previously, therefore, the majority of students were not novices. Only 12% indicated that they hadn't taken online courses before.

Figure 5: If your answer to the previous question was yes, was this course easier, more difficult, or about the same to navigate through?



In Figure 5, one can see that when comparing the QM designed course to other courses, 40% found the course easier to navigate than other courses, 40% found it about the same, and 13% found it more difficult than other courses. Therefore, the majority of students seemed to be pleased with the design/format of the course in terms of navigation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the students in this MBA organizational behavior class rated the following components very useful: *Chapter Objectives, About the Course, Start Here, About the Instructor* and *Important Resources*. Rated as somewhat useful were sections on *Introduce Yourself, Minimal Technical Skills Assistance, Communication Etiquette, and Accessibility Information*. Since the majority of students in the class had taken online courses at this university previously, they seemed to be least desirous of viewing the Institutional Resource tab.

Eighty-eight percent of students indicated that it was easy to access the assignments in the QM format, so it appears that the QM design was effective for this course.

Ninety-three percent of students indicated that they felt only "somewhat" connected to other students in the class, while only seven percent felt "very" connected. This was important information for the author in planning future courses.

Of particular interest to the author was that forty percent of the students felt the course design/format was easier to follow than other online courses, and forty percent of the students felt the course was about the same in navigation, while only 13% felt it was more difficult to follow.

This being the first time that this course was offered in the QM format, the survey results proved that this format was successful. At the end of the semester, the Quality Matters external review team met and rated the course with 83 out of 85 points, so the course received the seal of approval from the review team as well as being a student success.

In summary, the author believes that the use of Quality Matters for uniformity purposes is an excellent quality control mechanism. The use of reviewers from other universities critiquing the course is an added bonus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After viewing the survey results for this course, it is recommended that follow-up studies be done in future classes to obtain longitudinal, reliable data which would lead to continuous improvement of the design/format of this and other courses. It is also recommended that other variables be studied (ie. age and gender) to see which QM components make significant differences in the comprehension of the course (for those specific groups).

Another avenue of interest might be the addition of more synchronous activity and/or audio-video conferencing through Web Ex or similar media to increase student connectivity. The results of that activity would then be measured through student survey and data analysis.

Also, as part of future research, comparison studies between QM and other similar certification providers might be conducted in the area of quality control in online education to determine which design process is most effective.

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