# Applying the Quality Matters (QM)™ rubric to improve online business course materials

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**ABSTRACT**

Online classes, hybrid or blended classes, and web-facilitated classes all employ online materials, which instructors and students are using at ever-increasing rates. Accordingly, instructors should continuously evaluate the effectiveness of such online materials. This paper sets forth the author's initial attempts to analyze a business course pursuant to items in the Quality Matters (QM)™ Rubric designed by an organization whose mission is to certify the quality of online and blended courses. The paper illustrates how the author was able to begin to improve the business course with the assistance of the Rubric. The paper also illustrates how student input can significantly assist the QM review process.

Keywords: Quality Matters, rubric, online, hybrid, blended, business course

## INTRODUCTION

### Online Learning

For the last ten years, the Sloane Consortium has tracked online learning in U.S. higher education. (Allen & Seaman, 2013) Sloane defines online courses as those in which 80 to 100 percent of the course content is delivered online, usually with no face-to-face meetings of instructors and students. It defines hybrid or blended courses as those in which 30 to 79 percent of the course content is delivered online, typically with online discussions and a reduced number of face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face courses are those in which 0 to 29 percent of the content is delivered online with a full number of face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face courses are subdivided into traditional courses (which use no online technology) or web-facilitated courses (which employ various types of online materials). (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 7)

Sloane's latest survey found that by Fall 2012, an all-time high of 32% of students had taken at least one online course in their college career. The latest survey also found that the number of students taking at least one online course increased by over 570,000 in the last year to a new total of 6.7 million. Moreover, the online enrollment as a percent of total enrollment at degree-granting postsecondary institutions has increased from 9.6% to 32% in 10 years. (Allen & Seaman, 2013, pp. 4-5) Undergraduate business students enrolled in online courses and online programs at an even higher rate. (Weyant, 2013, p. 2).

The Sloane survey documents the dramatic increase in online courses. Similarly, increases have occurred in hybrid/blended and web-facilitated courses, which also use online materials. One example pertains to the growing trend toward flipped courses, in which instructors deliver certain course materials outside of class time via online materials. The instructor then is able to use class time to engage more active learning, including problem solving, collaboration with peers, and guidance from the instructor. (Bergmann & Sams, 2012) The growth of flipped learning is illustrated by the Flipped Learning Network website for educators, which started out with 2,500 members in January, 2012 and which grew to 12,000 educators by March, 2013. (Bergmann & Sams, 2013 White Paper, p. 3)

Advantages of using online materials for flipped learning are similar to using them for other web-facilitated courses, hybrid/blended courses, and online courses. Online materials provide flexibility, elimination of geographical barriers, improved convenience, and effectiveness for individualized and collaborative learning. (Pinto & Anderson, 2013, p. 2) They also assist with priming (motivating students by getting them familiar with a topic), pretraining (spreading out the cognitive load on students), and enabling diverse learners (by means of self-pacing). (Bergmann & Sams, 2013 Review, pp. 7-9)

Online materials, however, are not necessarily helpful just because they are materials online. Students, for example, are neutral with respect to their expectations regarding online materials. (McCarty, Bennett, & Carter, 2013, p. 5) Sometimes the materials work and sometimes they do not. (Pinto & Anderson, pp. 6-7) Certain results from the Sloane survey

indicate that online materials and online courses are improving. In the 2003 survey, 57.2 percent of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face education, and that number is now 77.0 percent. (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 5) However, the survey also shows that only 30.2 percent of chief academic officers believe their faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education, which is lower than the rate in 2004. (p. 6) Faculty do have concerns about the assessment of online instruction. In response to the question as to whether "my institution has good tools in place to assess the quality of online instruction," 37.5% of faculty who teach on line strongly agreed or agreed, compared with only 19.9% of the faculty who do not teach online. Conversely, 49% of faculty who teach on line and 50% of faculty who do not teach on line strongly agreed or agreed that the institution has good tools in place to assess the quality of face-to-face instruction. (p. 39)

**Quality Matters**

The Quality Matters (QM) not-for-profit organization (developed by MarylandOnline with funding from FIPSE - the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) recognizes the need to evaluate and improve online instruction and offers proprietary tools for quality assurance for online instruction via training, peer review, and certification. QM current has more than 600 institutional subscribers and 22,000 faculty and staff members in 46 states. QM provides guidance for quality control of online instruction via three main mechanisms. (MarylandOnline, 2013).

First, it provides the QM Rubric Workbook for Higher Education, specifically formulated to evaluate the online course design of online and hybrid/blended courses, but also very useful to instructors who teach web-facilitated courses. The QM Rubric is based (and periodically updated) on research-supported and public best practices. The Rubric contains general and specific review standards with a scoring system along with annotations that contain explanations and examples. (MarylandOnline, 2013).

Second, QM provides for a peer review process whereby trained QM peer reviewers provide constructive and specific comments for course strengths and areas of improvement. The process for reviewing a course, with the ultimate goal being QM certification, involves three reviewers with online teaching experience and training. The Master Reviewer serves as Team Chair and is joined by at least one subject matter expert and at least one reviewer external to the institution offering the course under review. (MarylandOnline, 2013).

Third, QM provides various professional development opportunities on-site, on-line, and via Blackboard Collaborator to prepare faculty to design and improve courses and to hold QM roles. For example, the author first learned of QM via an institutional faculty development session to assist faculty with their online courses and then attended a workshop on applying the QM Rubric. The author is currently self-assessing online course materials in the hopes of eventually getting courses QM-certified. (MarylandOnline, 2013).

## QM AND LITERATURE REVIEW

QM has conducted its own literature review of the assessment of online instruction. Such review, however, is by no means exhaustive. Many excellent books of teaching instruction apply just as well to online materials as they do to face-to-face instruction. For example, in preparing online materials, the author has made great use of Teaching with Style by Anthony Grasha (1996) as well as the more recent Teach Like a Champion by Doug Lemov (2010). Books specifically written with online materials in mind can also be very helpful: Designing Courses and Teaching on the Web: A "How-To" Guide to Proven, Innovative Strategies by Mercedes Maria Fisher (2003).

An even more specific book is E-learning in the 21st Century by D. Randy Garrison (2011, 2nd ed.), which sets forth the well-developed community of inquiry framework involving social presence (communication among mutually supportive group members), cognitive presence (learning via reflection and discourse), and teaching presence (intentional guidance by the instructor). One author recently suggested that the community of inquiry model serves well as a pedagogical model for online instructors and analyzed his own undergraduate human resource management course with the model. (Weyant, p. 2)

The Sloan Consortium has developed a much more specific and comprehensive assessment for online instruction than the community of inquiry model. Based on a study by 43 experts in online education administration, Sloane features A Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Education Programs. The Scorecard has 70 equally-weighted items in the nine areas of institutional support, technology support, course development and instructional design, course structure, teaching and learning, social and student engagement, faculty support, student support, and evaluation and assessment. (Lorenzetti, 2013)

Even though the Scorecard was designed to assess online instruction for institutions, rather than individual courses, many of its categories and items apply well to individual courses. For example, under the category of institutional support, policies and guidelines should be in place for all the courses at an institution to authenticate that students enrolled in the online course are the students completing the course work. Many of the items under the categories of course development and instructional design (e.g. measurable learning objectives), course structure (e.g. syllabus), teaching and learning (e.g. student-to-student interaction and faculty-to-student interaction) are also items under the QM Rubric. (Lorenzetti, 2013)

The QM Rubric, as with the community of inquiry framework and the Sloan scorecard, is well-supported by research. An advantage of the QM Rubric is that it is more comprehensive and specific than the community of inquiry framework (Hall, 2010) and more specifically applicable to individual courses than the Sloan scorecard. Another advantage of the QM Rubric is that it is routinely updated with editions for 2005, 2006-07, 2008-2010, and 2011-13. Updating occurs pursuant to updated literature reviews. The literature review for the 2008-2010 edition contained over 100 articles (MarylandOnline, 2008) and the literature review for the 2011-13 edition contained nearly 150 articles. (MarylandOnline, 2011).

The current QM Rubric contains eight key areas (General Standards) of review and 41 Specific Review Standards. Twenty-one of the Specific Review Standards are essential standards; absence of any of them will cause a course to not be certified until the Standard is met. The 41 Standards are accompanied by detailed annotations and examples of good practice. The eight General Standards pertain to the following areas:

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

The QM Rubric focuses on the concept of "alignment" for General Standards 2-6, which must work together to facilitate student achievement of desired learning outcomes. (MarylandOnline, 2013) Each of the General Standards standards is supported by articles set forth in the previously-mentioned literature reviews, and this paper does not propose to review that support in detail. However, certain articles pertaining to the key concept of alignment bear special mention. Swan, Matthews, Bogle, Boles, and Day (2010) found that their QM revision to map objectives to outcomes resulted in better student outcomes. Similarly, Kirkwood and Price (2008) found that assessment items should align with learning outcomes to produce better learning. This author, for example, is currently studying whether student performance on multiple choice reviews and quizzes correlates with student performance on application-type questions.

Instructors also need to align their online instructional materials with their learning objectives. Li and Liu (2005), with their Online Top-Down Modeling Model, found that instructors should consider the objective/ends/task before the materials/means/tool. Similarly, Picciano (2009) proposed a Blending with Purpose model wherein instructors first carefully consider their objectives and then determine how to apply the technologies that will work best for them.

Once instructors have applied QM and successfully aligned their learning objectives, assessment tools, instructional materials, learner interaction, and course technology, they should clarify such alignment to their students. Preston *et al.* (2010) found that faculty should explain what role lectures, technology, and other activities play in the learning process, i.e., how everything lines up for each unit.

## APPLICATION OF THE QM RUBRIC

Instructors who want to apply the most completely researched and recently revised QM Rubric consisting of the eight General Standards and 41 Specific Review Standards can access it

via institutional or individual membership in QM. This paper sets forth the author's application of the first two Specific Review Standards within General Standard 1 to a legal environment of business course at a Midwestern regional comprehensive university with primarily traditional, resident students. Most all of these students have had significant access to online material in web-facilitated courses, but many have not taken a hybrid/blended or completely online course. In applying the two Specific Review Standards, the author surveyed students (100 responses from mostly business students) for their opinions as to which specific actions to implement.

General Standard 1 is entitled Course Overview and Introduction and states: "The overall design of the course is made clear to the student at the beginning of the course." Specific Review Standard 1.1 states: "Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components." One of the advantages of an instructor applying the QM Rubric to courses is that the instructor is required to look at the course from a fresh perspective. For example, in reviewing Standard 1.1 on how to get started, the author pulled up the course home page in Moodle and noticed that in the prior year's conversion from Blackboard, there were several navigation panes that were unnecessary and a few that were empty. In previously reviewing the home page, the author without specific QM guidance had simply noted that the usual materials were present, but did not notice the extra panes. Students new to the course, however, would wonder why the panes were there, which would likely impede their efficient navigation of the materials.

The annotations and examples that come with Standard 1.1 suggest various ways to help students get started in a course, so the author asked students in an anonymous survey to rank some of the options in order of preference. The students also had the opportunity to comment upon their selections. The survey ranking item was set forth as follows:

> Please rank the following from the most preferred way (1) to the least preferred way (6) to get students started in a course and to help them find various course components.
>
> 1) Provide a link at the top of the course home page to the course syllabus that would contain the course components.
> 2) Provide a "Read Me First" or "Start Here" button that directs students to the course syllabus that contains the course components.
> 3) Provide a statement that provides directions on how to navigate the course components.
> 4) Provide a diagram setting forth the course components.
> 5) Provide a video setting forth a course tour of the course components.
> 6) Provide a scavenger hunt assignment that requires students to investigate the course components.

The options to get students started generally range from the simplest option to the most elaborate option and that turned out to be the order of preference selected by the students. Typical student comments stated a preference for "quick and simple" and "things that do not take up extra time/extra space" and an aversion to options that "would be cumbersome" or "require

too much time." Some comments, however, favored the visually-based options 4-6. For example, one student said, "students will more likely want to watch a video or do an activity than read directions so that they can see exactly what to do."

Based on the survey rankings and student comments, the author plans to add a start button pursuant to option 2. Although option 1 was most popular (with 88% of students selecting it as one of their top 3 preferences), option 2 was almost as popular (with 81% of students selecting it as one of their top 3 preferences). The author will also consider adding option 4, 5, or 6, as something that more visual learners may use if they wish; an average of one fourth of those students surveyed listed options 4, 5, and 6 as among their top 3 options. The author will not require students to use the visual options, though, because of comments by most students that they prefer the simple, time-saving methods rather than the more complex methods that would be "a hassle" or even "extremely annoying."

The author also solicited student input with respect to Specific Review Standard 1.2., which states "Students are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course." Suggestions from the annotations to this standard include those pertaining to the format for the online syllabus and/or other online materials detailing the purpose and structure of the course. Accordingly, the author asked the students for their preferences regarding a course syllabus as follows.

> Please rank the following from the most preferred way (1) to the least preferred way (4) to inform students about a course and its course components:
>
> 1) Provide students a link to the syllabus that will come up in downloadable document format.
> 2) Provide students a link to the syllabus that will come up in online format.
> 3) Provide students a link to the syllabus that will come up in online format that has a table of contents hyperlinked to sections within the syllabus.
> 4) Provide students hyperlinks to various online sections, which make the traditional syllabus structure unnecessary.

Students' first choice was option 1 because they wanted to print the syllabus and refer to it at times they were not connected to the Internet. Options 2 and 3 essentially tied for second choice, and Option 4 lagged far behind. Based on the survey rankings and student comments, the author plans to provide for option 1 and option 3. Although option 1 was students' favorite option (with 70% of students selecting option 1 as one of their top two choices), options 2 and 3 were also popular (with 59% selecting option 2 as one of their top two choices and 58% selecting option 3 as one of their top two choices). Having a syllabus that has a table of contents hyperlinked to various sections makes sense considering the number of pages in many syllabi. The author will not completely forgo the traditional syllabus structure pursuant to option 4 because the surveyed students are not yet ready for that (with only 12% of students selecting option 4 as one of their top two choices).

The QM Rubric does not suggest that instructors survey students when applying the Standards. However, as demonstrated above, the solicitation of student opinion in the

application of Specific Review Standards 1.1 and 1.2 was most helpful. In the absence of the numerical rankings and student comments, the author would have chosen different options for those Standards. Obtaining student input also invests students in the decision-making process and provides the instructor with an opportunity to explain why the course is set up as it is. Moreover, it seems more efficient to gather student input directly on course design issues prior to the course being offered rather than to try to sift through post-course evaluation comments to find comments pertinent to course design.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

In agreement with the literature, the author found it very useful to begin to apply the QM Rubric to a business course that uses online materials and that the author has taught as a web-facilitated course, a hybrid/blended course, and as an online course. The author recommends the Rubric to other faculty members who want to improve their courses via self-evaluation, institutional internal review, and/or the QM external review and certification process.

The author further recommends that instructors who apply the QM Rubric seek input from their students in doing so. Instructors will not always be able to predict which online features students will favor, and students will appreciate the opportunity to contribute to course design.

In the future, the author will continue to seek the input of students in applying the remaining standards of the QM Rubric to business courses. Moreover, the author will carefully review post-course student evaluations of the online materials and courses reviewed with the Rubric. One of the self-admitted limitations of the Rubric is that it deals primarily with course design, which is a key (but not exclusive) factor of course success. Other factors of course success include course delivery, course content, institutional infrastructure, learning management system, faculty readiness, and student readiness. (MarylandOnline, 2013) The author also plans to analyze whether student opinions of certain features and changes initiated by QM review are the same or different based on the students' gender, class rank, age, or major.

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