

## **Examining Standards for Distance Education Systems**

**Barbara B. Lockee**     **John K. Burton**     **Kenneth R. Potter**  
Virginia Tech, USA

### **Abstract**

How does one know if a distance education course or program is effectively designed? Many organizations have established standards that detail the essential qualities of effective distance education systems. Accreditation groups, professional associations, foundations, and even individual institutions have created sets of guidelines and requirements to serve as evaluation frameworks for distance education. This qualitative investigation examines common themes among differing organizations with regard to defining quality distance learning experiences.

## **1. Introduction**

What factors determine the quality of distance-delivered instruction? Given the rapid proliferation of distance education (DE) across a variety of contexts, there has been much discussion regarding the importance of the effective design of DE courses. Consequently, many organizations have established a variety of criteria and standards that detail the essential qualities of effective distance learning experiences. Accreditation groups, professional associations, foundations, and even individual institutions have created sets of guidelines and requirements to serve as evaluation frameworks for DE. Due to the extensive growth of distance education in K-12, corporate, military, and higher education environments, an analysis is warranted as to how varying organizations define “effective” design of distance learning experiences. More broadly, information presented from this study can provide insights to the instructional design community, particularly with regard to increasing awareness of the importance of the ID process in the design of distance delivered programming. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to present findings of a qualitative analysis of standards related to distance course design, including commonalities and differences among organizations with regard to defining quality distance learning experiences.

### **1.1 Perspective/Theoretical Framework**

Valuing, or rating, the usefulness, importance, or worth of an educational experience is at the heart of evaluation (Sanders, 1994). Hence, evaluation standards are inherently “value” driven, as they reflect a perceived set of values by a given organization. The practice of instructional design is conducted by individuals and entities with a widely varying range of knowledge and experience regarding the theoretical and practical aspects of ID (Larson & Lockee, 2009). Unfortunately, the design and development of instruction is often performed by people and/or agencies with little to no awareness of the ID process as a formalized activity, much less its theoretical underpinnings.

Related to this idea, exponential growth is occurring in the number of organizations that engage in the practice of distance education. Corporate, higher education, K-12, government, and non-profit groups alike are leveraging the ability to offer instructional programs through distributed means. In responding to this growth, there is widespread interest in maintaining the quality of distance learning experiences. As regulatory and policy-making bodies ranging from professional associations to accrediting agencies create standards of practice related to the instructional design of DE courses, awareness and adoption of ID is (or is not) reflected in these specifications.

## **2. Methodology**

A qualitative approach was utilized to analyze standards related to the design of distance-delivered courses. Data about each organization was collected through a combination of website reviews, policy documents, and phone interviews with staff members and institutional clientele. Document analysis comprised the majority of this review, with phone interviews serving in a supplementary capacity.

Ten organizations representing a broad array of educational interests were reviewed for the purposes of this investigation. The following groups possessed a set of standards related to the effective design of distance education courses for postsecondary education. While this data set is not exhaustive, this study strived to encompass a wide variety of entities in order to gain a comprehensive perspective on perceptions related to quality distributed learning experiences. Standards from the following organizations in Table 1 were included in this study.

<Table 1> Organizations maintaining standards for distance education programming

	Organization Name	Type	Mission
1.	Distance Learning Accreditation Board (DLAB) <a href="http://www.usdla.org/html/resources/accreditation.htm">http://www.usdla.org/html/resources/accreditation.htm</a>	Accrediting service	Provides accrediting services for distance courses/programs on behalf of its parent organization, the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA).
2.	Monterey Institute (MI)	Non-profit organization	The Monterey Institute for Technology and Education is committed to improving access to education.
3.	Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) <a href="http://www.sloan-c.org/effective/pillarreport1.pdf">http://www.sloan-c.org/effective/pillarreport1.pdf</a>	Special interest group (sponsored by the Sloan Foundation)	The purpose of Sloan-C is to help learning organizations continually improve quality, scale, and breadth of their online programs.
4.	Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) <a href="http://www.sreb.org/programs/edtech/pubs/2006Pubs/06T05_Standards_quality_online_courses.pdf">http://www.sreb.org/programs/edtech/pubs/2006Pubs/06T05_Standards_quality_online_courses.pdf</a>	Nonprofit organization	The SREB helps government and education leaders in its 16 member states work together to advance education and improve the social and economic life of the region.
5.	Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) <a href="http://www.ihep.org/assets/files//publications/M-R/QualityOnTheLine.pdf">http://www.ihep.org/assets/files//publications/M-R/QualityOnTheLine.pdf</a>	Nonprofit organization	The IHE is dedicated to access and success in postsecondary education around the world.

6.	Southern Association for Colleges and Schools (SACS) <a href="http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/distance%20education.pdf">http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/distance%20education.pdf</a>	Regional accrediting agency	The primary regional accrediting body for the eleven U.S. Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia).
7.	The Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools (ABHES) <a href="http://www.abhes.org">www.abhes.org</a>	Professional accrediting agency	Provides accreditation services for private, postsecondary institutions in the United States offering predominantly allied health education programs, including those offered via distance education.
8.	Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology (ACCCT) <a href="http://www.accsct.org">www.accsct.org</a>	Professional accrediting agency	Provides accreditation standards and services for private, postsecondary career schools and colleges.
9.	Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools (ACICS) <a href="http://www.acics.org">www.acics.org</a>	Specialized accrediting agency	Advances educational excellence at independent, nonpublic career schools, colleges, and organizations in the United States and abroad.
10.	Distance Education and Training Council, Accrediting Commission (DETC) <a href="http://www.detc.org">www.detc.org</a>	Specialized accrediting agency	Provides educational standards and accreditation services specifically for distance education providers. A variety of clientele are served by this organization, including k-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, military agencies, and professional associations.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Themes

Analysis of the criteria for “quality” distance education courses and programs revealed a set of thematic issues, the most noticeable from an IDT perspective being the absence of instructional design (ID) as a comprehensive framework for distance course planning and development. Other themes that emerged relate to the comparative nature of the standards with regard to campus-based instruction, mandates for interaction, media selection issues, faculty training requirements, and student support. Each theme is discussed as follows.

The absence of design

Examining the 10 sets of standards from an instructional design lens, there is an apparent lack of mention of instructional design as a term, much less a guiding framework for distance course planning and development. Only one organization referred to the instructional design process by name (Distance Education and Training Council, 2009): “The organization and presentation of instructional materials are in accord with sound principles of learning and grounded in sound instructional design principles” (p. 2). While ID did not appear as a process by which to guide distance course development, all of the groups identified one or more components of ID in their standards related to distance coursework. The DLAB stated that “Distance learning courses must be pedagogically sound. They must be compatible with the technology and attuned to the nature and needs of participants” (Distance Learning Accreditation Board, No date, p. 3). The DETC, ACCST, and the IHEP delineated the need to specify instructional objectives or learning outcomes. All organizations identified the need for course or program evaluation.

Among all 10 sets of standards, the Monterey Institute of Technology and Education (Online Course Evaluation Project, 2006) offers the only recommendation for a theoretical basis for distance course development:

Instructional philosophy refers to the theories of learning that underlie the presentation of content, the kinds of activities and assessments created for the course, and the role of the instructor and the learner in the process of learning. Varying instructional philosophies include 1) linear progression, fixed sequence, 2) drill and practice—presentation, memorization, and assessment, 3) constructivist learning in which learners construct new learning based on prior learning (p. 9).

While this representation of various learning theories is limited at best, it at least acknowledges the need to ground design of coursework on established theoretical constructs.

A comparative perspective

One of the more interesting themes that appears across most of the standards is that they tend to be written from a comparative perspective. In an earlier analysis of accreditation standards, Lezberg (2007) concurs, stating that the standards assume that “the success of education depends on its taking place at certain times and in certain places where the faculty member and his or her students are present in a locale appropriate for learning...” (p. 405). So strong has been this assumption that historically institutions did not offer the same credit for correspondence courses, many times assigning continuing education credit only (Lezberg).

The comparative perspective is most often represented in terms of measuring the effectiveness of student learning. Half of the organizations analyzed (ABHES, ACCST, ACICS, SACS, and Sloan) specifically indicated that the effectiveness of distance courses is to be measured in terms of comparing the achievement of distance students to campus-based students. For example, the ABHES

website states that distance education evaluation reports must contain “a comparison study/analysis including the overall examination and final grade results for those students enrolled in similar courses/programs of study on a residential basis versus those engaged in distance education” (Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, No date, p. 136). The ACCST guidelines state that

Observable, measurable, and achievable student performance outcomes must be identified so that programs or courses of study offered through distance education methods can be compared to programs or courses of study with similar subject matter and objectives, whether offered by DE methods or residential means (Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology, No date, p. 90).

One of Sloan’s “Five Pillars of Excellence” in online learning is learning effectiveness, which contends that “On-campus and online instruction achieve comparable learning outcomes” (Moore, 2005, p. 5). While the validity of such comparisons has been criticized with regard to determining the effectiveness of DE (Head, Lockee, & Oliver, 2002; Lockee, Burton, & Cross, 1999), recent federal endorsements of such an approach will likely perpetuate this evaluation strategy (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Other comparison points between campus-based and distance courses relate to the content and duration of programs, assuming that both instances should be the same. For example, the ACCST states that, “The school must demonstrate that the content and length of a distance education program or course of study are comparable to residential programs. The school must justify any deviations from established clock-to-credit hour conversions, if applicable” (Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges of Technology, No date, p. 90). The ACICS standards indicate that, “Requirements for successful completion of distance education courses and programs must be similar to those of residential courses/programs” (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, No date). Again, the assumption is made that programs are being transitioned from place-based instruction to a distance approach, not that unique needs are being addressed through the creation of new, audience-specific educational programming.

The notion that distance learning should be comparable to on-campus learning is a phenomenon that has existed throughout the history of distance education (Thompson & Irele, 2007). There would seem to be a certain irony in this in that the university system itself grew up when the primary technology of content transmission were books which were rare and expensive (Cobban, 1975). Education took place in the church or in the homes of the wealthy. The early universities were a cheaper solution to make content available to those who were not wealthy (although in England inclusion of commoners was not encouraged until the 1500s) nor were they interested in a monastic life. In some cases professors wrote books. In other cases they annotated books the books of others. In all cases they taught the book (Cobban, 1975). Lecture was the primary method in order to transmit the book. Interaction between student and professor was very much the interaction between the student and the content. Then, as now, professors did not study pedagogy or design or any method that might be helpful to structure and transmit knowledge let alone models that might not involve “transmission” from teacher to student. Yet, Schalick (2006) says,

Universities, long immune to change by virtue of their role as societal institution, are challenged by technologies on all levels and are being reinvented with or without planned strategies. The extraordinary growth of means of communication, of access online to university courses, of new Internet-facilitated access to the vast resources of international libraries once held close to the smaller academic community, has exploded the concept of where knowledge resides and how it is to be accessed (p. 2).

Unsurprisingly, the traditions of the universities and colleges conflict with the potential offered by new technologies. Nowhere is this more evident than in the standards for distance education. Again, with the exception of Sloan which promotes asynchronous learning networks, economy of scale, and new “markets,” (Moore, 2005), many of the standards for distance learning assume that all things should be comparable between face-to-face students on campus and distance learning students off campus.

### **3.2 Mandatory interaction**

The majority of these organizations require opportunities for interaction between the instructor and student and/or among students, but do not define a purpose for such interaction. For example, the SREB requires that “the course or program provides for appropriate interaction between faculty and students and among students” (Standards for Quality Online Courses, 2006, p. 5). The IHEP maintains a similar requirement: “Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and email” (Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education, 2000, p. 2). Learners are not as convinced of the importance of such interaction (see, e.g. Su, Bonk, Mafjuka, Liu, & Lee, 2005) and, depending on the delivery approach (synchronous versus asynchronous), find it in opposition to some of the reasons they enroll in distance education.

In contrast with other requirements for interaction, the DETC specifies the inclusion of interaction for the purpose of student support.

Encouragement of Students: An active program, designed to optimize interaction between the institution and the student is followed to encourage students to start, continue, and finish the program in which he/she is enrolled, if continuing and finishing are the student’s goals (Distance Education and Training Council, 2009, p. 3)

The emphasis within this criterion is communication between the institution and the learner to facilitate student progress within a program, rather than interaction for instructional purposes. While interaction certainly has beneficial manifestations within instruction (i.e., practice, feedback), mandating interaction without clear purpose does not contribute to the instructional effectiveness of the DE experience (Lockee, Cennamo, Potter, & Burton, 2007).

### **3.3 Media selection**

Distance course design choices related to media selection can be organized into two categories: **delivery mode and media attributes** (Head, Lockee, & Oliver, 2002). With regard to distance delivery mode, the ACICS maintains a different set of requirements if courses take an asynchronous approach. Their standards for self-paced instruction state that “Institutions must notify and receive approval from ACICS prior to using self-paced as a mode of delivery” (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, No date). Additionally, if teaching self-paced courses, “Institutions must shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered environment” (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools). The interesting aspect of this requirement is that there is not a parallel mandate for “learner-centered” synchronous distance offerings.

Some of the guidelines analyzed do reflect the importance of choosing a delivery approach that supports instructional goals. The IHEP contends that learning outcomes should drive the media delivery mechanism, not the availability of technology (Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education, 2000).

With regard to media attributes of distance delivery systems, the MITE guidelines describe different media types and how they might be appropriately used to achieve certain objectives in distance courses. For example, “Audio can be used as a narrative clarification for still images, to introduce instructional elements in the course, or to create more interactive ways to learn” (Online Course Evaluation Project, 2006, p 9). This set of standards provides the most detailed recommendations regarding media selection from an instructional design standpoint.

In some cases of media selection, expectations exceed practicality. For example, according to the SREB, quality online courses “must utilize technology that enables the teacher to customize each student’s learning experiences through tools and formats such as video, interactive features, resources and links to related information” (Standards for Quality Online Courses, 2006). These courses are expected to include multiple learning opportunities or multiple learning paths to master the content, based on student needs. Although technologically possible, this level of customization is not achievable through technology alone but also requires the services of qualified instructional designers with knowledge of the multiple factors influencing student learning experiences. A more realistic approach is seen in the following standards: “The institution uses appropriate and readily accessible technology to optimize interaction between the institution and the learner and enhance instructional and educational services” (Distance Education and Training Council, 2009), and, “The technology used is appropriate to the nature and objectives of the programs and courses and expectations concerning the use of such technology are clearly communicated to students” (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2006).

### **3.4 Faculty training**

Another common theme among the standards is a requirement or the provision of faculty training for distance environments. Four of the 10 organizations (DETC, ACICS, SACS, and ABHES) mandate training for faculty who will teach at a distance. The focus of training, however, seems to be technological proficiency rather than pedagogical preparation for distance instruction. For example, the ABHES requires that, “Faculty is adequately trained in use of distance education technologies” (Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools, No date, p. 136). However, the DETC goes beyond simply requiring training and expects that faculty will maintain an approved professional development plan that includes regular participation in programming related to teaching at a distance. Interestingly, the same consideration is typically not given to the importance of planning campus-based instruction (Spector, 2008).

### **3.5 Student services**

Another facet of the comparative nature of the standards relates to the offering of services for distance students. Taking what works on campus and moving it off campus leads to further difficulties with student services. Consider the following standards:

Students have adequate access to the range of services appropriate to support the programs, including admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and delivery of course materials, and placement and counseling (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2006).

The institution must provide student services such as counseling, academic advising, guidance, financial aid, and employment assistance for students enrolled in distance education courses/programs. (Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, No date)

These standards have multiple problems when applied to distance education courses and programs. Many financial aid requirements are established by the federal government and distance education

students taking a single course in a term may not qualify. Counseling services and employment assistance typically are offered on an institutional basis and not on a course or program basis. Diffusion of these services to distance education students is likely to lag well behind campus services, especially given that these services were specifically designed for traditional, campus-based learners.

#### 4. Summary Observations

While the differing sets of standards reviewed exemplified varying levels of specificity with regard to the design and delivery of distance education programming, the authors contend the majority of these frameworks lack a comprehensive perspective necessary for the development of effective mediated learning experiences, particularly in the absence of ID as a generalizable process. Some of the standards do not align well with empirically-tested course design principles (e.g., mandatory interaction without specified purpose, student achievement based on a comparison to another learner group rather than specified objectives, etc.). All but one fail to recognize the need for a theoretical basis for instructional decision-making, but the absence of a theory base is commonly paralleled within location-based programming. The two organizations that primarily serve distance learners, the DETC and the DLAB (a function of the USDLA), seem to maintain more instructionally sound recommendations for the creation of distance education, likely since their mission and focus is solely to serve distance learners as a group of learners in and of themselves, rather than to serve existing institutions seeking to transition location-based programming off-campus. Because these groups exist in service to distance education as a primary approach to instruction, their recognition of the potential of this educational method to serve new and different groups of learners through unique, accessible learning environments is reflected in their determinations of “quality” learning experiences.

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