Standardizing Higher Education Curriculum for Effective Learning in Online and Face-to-face Courses: A Critical Analysis and Introduction to Master Course Shell Models

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis to provide a critical analysis of simultaneous online and Face-to-face course development. An exploration of effective course development utilizing master course shell models for effective program development in efforts to document similar learning experiences for learners that take the same course in multiple modalities, as well as the value of standardized assessment within undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

Keywords: curriculum, curriculum development, assessment, course development, learning experiences, education

I. Introduction

Critics of online learning are, typically, concerned that students do not receive the same academic experience as students taking a course as a Face-to-face (FTF) within the same program. Some express theoretical concerns that if a student completes the same course, with the same course description, from the same school could not achieve the same learning outcomes when the modality of the course offering differs. Institutional administrators, as well as curriculum experts work to achieve mirror courses, between online and FTF courses that offer the same learning outcomes, however, accreditors require proof of effective mirroring between courses offered in different modalities. As higher education institutions everywhere strive to stay competitive through the development of competitive online graduate and undergraduate course offerings, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has expressed skepticism of the curriculum assessment and evaluation process when it concerns multiple modalities of learning. To monitor this more efficiently, in 2013, the HLC restructured its visitation process to focus more attention on curriculum evaluation forcing rigorous documentation of program development, execution, and evaluation (Higher Learning Commission, 2018).

The HLC has named itself as the ultimate gatekeeper of Higher Education experiences and the enforcer of educational fairness for students receiving similar certificates or degrees offered in multiple modalities from one University. There are other accrediting bodies that many higher education institutions can utilized for their degree offerings, however, the HLC holds the keys to federal financial aid for most campuses. The HLC's statement of enforcement is found within Criterion 3-Teaching and Learning: Quality, Resources, and Support, which requires documentation that schools are meeting the requirement of "The institutions' program quality and earning goals are consistent across all modes of delivery and all locations (on the main campus, at additional locations, by distance delivery, as duel credit, through constructional or consortial arrangements, or any other modality)" (Higher Learning Commission, 2018, 3.A.3). Assessment and standardization within higher education is paramount for higher education institutions that have online and FTF education learning environments. The HLC is at the helm of bringing down the ultimate consequence for many schools if proof is not properly documented and communicated to appropriate audiences through the loss of national accreditation.

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical analysis of simultaneous online and Face-to-face course development. Further this article will explain and purport how Master Course-Shell Models (MCSM) are for program development in efforts to document similar learning experiences for learners that take the same course in multiple modalities. Finally, a presentation of assessment-sharing from colleges and universities that have demonstrated success with multi-modality student learning outcome measurement. Insight is provided by two online graduate program directors at midsize private universities in the Midwest and Western United States. The program directors have implemented the use of MCSM into their programs in efforts to provide empirical evidence for accurate assessment reporting in multi-modality programs. Additionally, they will share how MCSMs offer a level of quality assurance to students enrolled within multi-modality programs that courses, no matter how they are taken, have the same learning outcomes and rigor.

II. Curriculum Leadership

Utilizing effective curriculum development strategies is critical for university program directors. Curriculum developers often design courses with the goal of enhancing the quality of educational programs. Effective programmatic development for online learning includes clear objectives, learning goals and assessment strategies that can be easily reported to institutions accrediting bodies. As all accrediting bodies, whether it is the HLC, or an individual subject accrediting body (i.e. for Business, Healthcare, Public Administration, Communication), have criteria that require program to prove that they are reporting their student learning outcomes. This measurement process usually requires direct and indirect measurements of student learning outcomes. Student learning outcomes provide professors, program directors and assessment staff with empirical data on student understanding of information and progress within a given course. Specifically, assessment data collected within a course provides rich information to determine how students are meeting student learning outcomes in their program of study.

The responsibility of a curriculum developer, or program director, is to maintain the documentation, or proof, that outcome are being measured within the program in a manner that is acceptable to the accrediting body they are reporting to. The strategic plan for this measurement process should be made at the conception of the program, monitored at the end of every term, as well as tracked in a program review every five years to determine program effectiveness and students learning. Higher education institutions can determine how to track and collect data in a manner that is effective for their course rotations, as well as their course development schedules. Strategic planning is begins at the inception of a new program, before class assignments are created the university should have a plan clearly identifying student learning outcomes that each student should meet prior to graduating with a degree in the area of study.

III. Master Course Shell Models

A master course shell model (MCSM) is operationally defined as; an educational course strategically designed is a standard baseline for any course with the same course number that is replicated over a period of time, clearly measures student learning outcomes and is not modified in any way during the deployment period regardless of what modality is used to offer the course. MCSM provide a standard baseline for measurement of effectiveness in student learning, assures uniformity, as well as a platform to enhance course instruction provided by various instructors. Academic freedom protects instructor expertise in their teaching and the delivery of course lecturs and information within the course. Additionally, personal instructor area expertise enhances the learning experience, and provides direct instruction to their students. Instructors should be invited to exercise and contribute to the overall course build; otherwise the instructor no longer is the educator but a facilitator. In addition, collaborative course design experiences enhances student learning and ensures students receive the highest quality course that is deployed to provide the highest chances for students to master learning outcomes for each course and their program of study.

MCSMs support the development of multi-modality course experiences. Recruitable students will likely expect flexibility within the format of their program; especially in adult education. MCSMs allow programs to monitor student learning outcomes and collect data within multi-modality offerings. "Alternative course delivery formats (e.g., online-learning formats) will improve students' content acquisition and skill development to the extent that they already possess the skill of self-direction in learning" (Dynan, Cate, Rhee, 2008, p. 100). Providing students with alternative delivery methods of courses in their program of study help them to apply skills readily and ensure the success of MCSMs. In addition, MCSMs help to create an environment which provides proof of how this development process is succeeding and helps to identify which modalities may need improvement.

Continual tracking of student learning outcomes, provide program directors and university administrators with data that can help determine when revisions are needed to MCSMs, as well as to ensure the student learning environment provides a rich learning experience for students.

IV. Closing "The Loop" on Curriculum Development with MCSMs

Curriculum development is, "The process of planning, constructing, implementing, and evaluating learning opportunities intended to produce desired change in learners" (Print, 1993, p. 23). This idea is not new. In the schooling of children in grades K-12, standardized curriculum development provides the platform to ensure effectiveness in instruction of students, as well as evaluating learning opportunities among students. Universities expect departments considering program development to look at the program holistically, just as we have done for years in educating our children. In fact, anyone who assumes a position within higher education in curriculum development or instructional design should be able to effectively ruminate about how student outcomes are measured in layers: within a degree plan, program, and the university as a whole. Higher education institutions across the United States are formalizing how they track student learning and assessment through curriculum design through a variety of approaches. A holistic approach can, and should, include measurement of a program's effect on co-curricular activities such as athletics, clubs, and potentially external organizations to remain effective in meeting student learning outcomes Community and technical colleges are beginning to find ways to develop systematic and relational curriculum that meets student and school assessment needs (Albashiry, Voogt, & Pieters, 2015). The formalization of standardized education and assessment provides personnel at any educational institution with a way to measure effectiveness in teaching, student learning and within programs.

Simply stated: curriculum built today should be assessable, organized and measurable in a way that allows for the changes to improve student learning outcomes. This measurement process is determined and monitored by higher education institutions in a manner that fits with their accreditation and course deployment methods.   The measurement process allows for a testing and improving process that is often viewed as a cycle or loop process. Livingston (1992) calls this a post-audit evaluation. Some universities complete a program review process every three to five years. At the end of the external review many institutions spend a year conducting a post-audit evaluation to determine needed changes in the student learning of a program. This provides administrators and faculty the opportunity to adjust learning outcomes, programmatic goals, assessment strategies and tracking, as well as MCSMs. Just as organizational development requires a strategic plan, there is a call for the curriculum development process to "Close The Loop" by documenting that each element integrated within a program is intentional, measurable and improved upon. This process should, also, consider the employability of graduates due to the knowledge and skills they have acquired (Lee, Foster, Snaith, 2016).

Monitoring, implementing and controlling is a vital process to course design and deployment of higher education programs. Elena, Cristina, Petruta (2017) share that programs who do not move through the phases of implementing, monitoring and controlling, and adjusting their curriculum often create their own boundaries to programs. Ignoring the phases may be considered mismanagement within the strategic planning process of curriculum development. In addition, it does not provide course developers with the opportunity to ensure the effectiveness of MCSMs from an administrative perspective. Understanding how the administration determines the effectiveness of a program, in addition to, data supporting student learning outcomes are met provides a comprehensive perspective of the effectiveness of a program within any higher education institution. Regardless, of the monitoring method, it is imperative to ensure that implementing, control and adjustments are strategic and planned within all programs at an institution.

MCSMs are versatile and allows for most measurement processes to be integrated into its build. As MCSMs are general plans for a course, implementation into all modalities as a baseline does not limit the actual measurement process. The MCSM simply makes sure that the measurement process is created, clear, and the same for all modalities. The measurement choice, whether it be embedded artifacts, tested experiences, traditional testing, writing samples, or any other measurement strategy is up to the program. An MCSM provides a clear picture for the utilization of the course learning outcomes within the student learning outcomes for a given program. Additionally, they provide standardization and simplify monitoring as all instructors and sections of a course allow for consistent measurement across many different variables within the delivery of a course.

V. MCSM Advantages and Implications

As previously stated, the paramount advantage of a MCSM is the allowance for strategic planning to occur with student learning outcome measurement and it increases the assurance for accrediting bodies courses offered in multi-modalities are receiving the same experiences. The uniformity of a MCSM allows new instructors to better understand the course descriptions and direction that the college or university would like for the course to bestow. If the MCSM is developed within a learning module system, such as Blackboard, it can also act as a template for standard course development that can be updated and replicated with ease. For example Franetovic and Bush (n.d.) attest that, "The practice of [course improvement using the MCSM] has improved the partnership between IT, course developers, faculty, and students, eliminated the inconsistencies in processes, course design and course delivery, allowed faculty to focus more on teaching and is ultimately believed to improve student learning and satisfaction" (par. 2). Finally, MCSMs allow for clear processes to be implemented for interdepartmental work on multi-modality learning coursework and "closing the loop".

Various educational advocates will have different opinions on how standardization hinders academic freedom (Fore, 1998). However, for accreditation purposes the MCSM doesn't dictate every minute of what is consumed in the classroom setting in the various platforms. The instructor teaches and leads the course. They do not facilitate instruction through the MCSM. It is not possible for the MCSM to account for each minute of learning in the course. Instructors teach students and provide solid feedback and learning opportunities for students to meet learning outcomes. Teachers should simply commit to co-collaborate with their peer educators on assessable criteria as directed by their educational institution. Simply, a MCSM, minimum guidebook that describes and shares what needs to be covered in a course in order to meet standardized learning outcomes.

VI. MCSM Qualitative Insight and Best Practices

The authors of this article are current program directors for graduate-level curriculum, one from a school in the Mid-West and from the West-Coast. These Program Directors will share their insight to their philosophy, and recommendations for best practices, behind the MCSM, as it is currently implemented at their Universities.

The MCSM should be created by content experts. Program Directors and curriculum or accreditation experts should not claim knowledge expertise on content. Often times the MSCM can be created by hired course creators who understand the program requirements and can create a digital shell of a course based on the programs parameters.

MCSM should be given to the students learning in different modalities on similar platforms. Likely a MCSM will be created in a Learning Module System (i.e. Blackboard, Moodle, Angel). For example, it could be suggested that the content expected to be assessed be found within an LMS system for learners in all modalities.

MCSM should not limit an instructors academic freedom. How faculty prepare to create discussion and interaction in their class should not be limited to the items in the MCSM. Instructors are educators and content experts themselves. Whatever is created by the professor in a course beyond the implemented MCSM items should be considered their own intellectual property.

MCSM should contain assessable content. In order to prove learning objectives and program goals are being met the content created in a MCSM should be purposefully assessable. Rubrics are highly suggested. Assessment software integration (i.e. Livetext or Chalk and Wire) may helpful.

MCSM should present a collaborative learning environment rich with information to provide valuable learning experiences. Faculty members teach coursese. MCSMs provide the platform to enhance teaching and student learning. Including relevant teaching activities, videos, assignments and goals that are assessable ensure that students have a rich environment for the strongest learning opportunity. In addition, a well-developed MCSM is rich in information that allows instructors to provide solid instruction to enhance student learning.

VII. Recommendations for Future Literature

As many higher education institutions determine and research best practices for curriculum development and implementation in all platforms it is necessary for colleges and universities to collaborate and share successes and failures. The Higher Learning Commission, and other accrediting agencies, desire institutions to be accountable for learning practices and to evaluate where their efforts were not as successful for improvement purposes.

Documentation of this self-improvement process is becoming paramount. Hopmann states (2003) that programs who desire to be systematic in their evaluation process should consider two items for curriculum control: process evaluation and product evaluation. The MCSM allows, if implemented properly, strategy for individual programs to create a process of evaluating a program's product. A call for research in both the processes and products produced by MCSMs would be ideal so that further research could extend and refresh best practices suggestions.

Hopmann (2003) states, "Those reforming a curriculum also hope, of course, that a change of goals, contents, and of the ways and means will enhance teaching somehow and in some way" (p. 459). It is our recommendation that curriculum and accreditation experts become dedicated to growing the body of literature surrounding the curriculum development process. MCSMs are just one way that curriculum developers can create a controlled environment for multi-platform learning and showing how similar learning outcomes can be achieved.

VIII. Conclusions

It is unfortunate that there is fear associated with many re-accreditation processes within colleges and universities. As higher education institutions strive to make sure they are compliant with all the requirements of their accrediting bodies there is often a feeling of uncertainty within the reporting process. This insecurity serves as one of the reasons institutions are reluctant to share their strategies for curriculum compliance. Curriculum compliance strategies are intellectual property of institutions. This can harbor hesitation among faculty members and curriculum developers. However, with colleges closure rates of small colleges and universities expected to triple in the coming years it is paramount that schools of all styles collaborate (Woodhouse, 2015). It is our hope, as authors of this article, that the MCSM can be of assistance to schools considering a new curriculum strategy.

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