

# HOW TO CHOOSE OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MATERIALS FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

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## **Introduction**

Commitment to lifelong learning is increasingly recognized as a key for improved performance for employers and career progression for individuals. Continuing education therefore can be based on an individually driven education system where individuals have learning agreements with a variety of parties, including their employer, their professional body, different academic institutions and other education providers. This requires a common language and reference standards both to improve communication and co-ordination between the partners and to enable individuals to achieve coherence in their overall learning plans and activities.

Education based on Open and Distance Learning (ODL) materials is thus becoming very important and essential for this type of learning contracts. The quality assessment of ODL materials has been a less favored field of research and it is necessary to assure reliability and confidence for this learning mode. It is needed an effective procedure for evaluating the quality of these courses and materials and how these can be used for a personal development plan. Evaluation is the meaning or interpretation of the data from the assessment In an institutional setting and the evaluator may be students, faculty, employers or accrediting agencies. The results of an assessment process should provide information, which can be used to determine whether or not intended outcomes are being achieved and how the ODL material can be improved.

In the assessment process it is important to distinguish between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is the collection of data and the feedback of the results on an ongoing basis. Formative assessment is designed to provide information for the purpose of improving the ODL material being assessed. Summative assessment is designed to produce information that can be used to make decisions about the effectiveness of the ODL process.

## **Preparation of an Evaluation Scheme**

The following six phases present an outline for the development of an assessment plan. The stages are illustrated with examples on the following pages. The examples follow the progress of a unique objective like "... assure that learners can create homepages in the web".

Stage 1 - Identify goals and learning objectives.

(Question 1 - What is to be achieved?)

(Question 2 - Under what circumstances will you know the goal has been achieved?)

1. The first step is to write a statement describing the broad outcome desired. Program evaluation is intended to provide information on how well an ODL material performs relative to its specific objectives and, ultimately, its broad goals. A goal should be far reaching and describe the best situation that could possibly be hoped for.

2. The learning objective is a statement derived from the goal that defined the circumstances by which it will be known if the desired change in learning skills has occurred. These learning objectives are precise in stating expected change, how the change should be proved, the expected level of change, and over what time period the change is expected.

Stage 2 - Develop performance criterion for each learning objective.

(Question - What will students be able to do, or be, or possess when the goal is accomplished?)

The performance criteria is a specific statement identifying the outcomes required to meet the objective and must be proved through evidence. It is important to identify criteria against which results will be measured. The indicator of performance are not easily apparent so therefore indicators are used to provide evidence of whether or not the desired performance exists.

Stage 3 - Determine the practice to be used to achieve goals.  
(Question - What will be done to achieve the goals and the learning objectives? )

It is important to define the practice to be followed in the classroom or by the individual learner prepared to obtain the specific performance for each learning objective.

Stage 4 - Select and apply assessment methods for each learning objective.  
(Question - What are the methods to obtain the information about each learning objective?)

The specified assessment methods to collect proof about the quantification of the learning indicators are used and the results are analyzed and compared against the performance criteria defined beforehand. The methods should be consistent with the criteria adopted. These can be inquiries, rating sheets, interviews and focus group protocols, etc., as appropriate.

Stage 5 - Feedback  
(Question - How to establish the communication channels to get the information about the ODL materials evaluation?)

The implementation of the feedback channels which provide information at appropriate timings to facilitate continuous improvement of practices, provide information for decision making, and provide basis for evaluation of the ODL material. One of the results of the evaluation is that faculty may determine that is necessary to provide intervention and/or provide complementary training. When results indicate that students are performing consistent with established criteria, faculty may extend the current practice to other students and to other courses.

Stage 6 - Performance progress  
(Question - Have the performance criteria been met and the objectives achieved?)

Since evaluation is the process of classifying meaning and value to assessment results it usually occurs during the continuous improvement process (formative evaluation) and at the end of a project (summative evaluation). A decision will need to be made concerning how many of the performance criteria must be met to say that the learning objective has been achieved.

### **Examples of Evaluation of ODL Materials**

#### **A. Interactivity**

The example is dedicated to measure interaction as a performance criteria of stage 2. The interaction takes place between instructor and learners, between learners and distant sites available through videoconferencing or other synchronous media. The questions asked will have to measure the level of interactivity between learners and tutors in a scale of 1 to 5 about the following issues

- a) possibility for questions
- b) participation of discussions on-line
- c) engagement in learning activities
- d) choice of themes for discussion
- e) off-line discussions

#### **B. Learners evaluation**

According to stage 4 the measurement of learner satisfaction with the learning activities of the ODL sessions has to be rated in a similar manner to the face-to-face learning activities. The rating should be done as a measurement on a given numeric scale of the following issues:

- a) active involvement
- b) activities were related with workplace tasks
- c) interesting challenge
- d) help to achieve learning objectives
- e) clarity of materials
- f) activities will help job tasks

### C. Cost effectiveness

The problem should be addressed in terms of verification of the goal defined in stage 1 as compared with the face to face learning activity. For that purpose a list of costs should be calculated to consider the quality of the option of the ODL material. The items to address could

- a) on-line costs (if used)
- b) equipment costs
- c) manuals
- d) videos or CD-ROM purchase
- e) trainer's fee

### References

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