The Evaluation Strategy
for the Marketing Component
of an Online MBA Course

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Introduction

This paper outlines the evaluation strategy for the Marketing component of an online MBA course. It explains the rationale behind the decisions taken in formulating the evaluation process, and includes an extensive checklist. Though this course forms part of an MBA, the strategy presented here can be applied to wide range of online courses, including language teaching. The aim of the author is to present a concise evaluation checklist, which other course designers can easily modify to suit their own needs.

The Rationale

'*Evaluation is the collection, analysis and interpretation of information about any aspect of a programme of education or training, as part of a recognised process of judging its effectiveness and any other outcomes it may have*.' [Mary Thorpe, 1988, quoted in Rowntree, 1992]

This statement encapsulates the essence of why evaluation is necessary, while also hinting at its scope and complexity. For it to be carried out effectively it clearly needs to be well structured, and if based on a recognised theory sufficient measures have to be taken to ensure the process isn't cut short, and actually encompasses all of the necessary steps. Eseryel [2002] undertook an analysis of different

approaches to evaluation and surmised that in practice they are rarely carried out in their entirety. They tend not to go beyond stage two, of what are typically four stage models. Stages one and two encompass the analysis and design and development of an instructional course, while stages three and four investigate the implementation of the course and its long term consequences for the learner and the educational institute itself. Eseryel found that the failure to carry through the evaluation was common to both goal-based models, which are more suitable to in-house training, and systems-based models, which are applicable to a wider range of instructional scenarios.

This failure was put down to a lack of understanding of the complexity of the process, and a tendency to ignore the collaborative nature of evaluation (it should involve all the stakeholders : the learners, the tutors and all levels of the institution). Eseryel [2002] claims evaluation models typically fall short in terms of comprehensiveness and '*fail to provide tools that guide organizations in their evaluation systems and procedures*.'

Morgan and O'Reilly [n.d.] highlighted a number of areas in which online, or 'flexible', courses differ from face-to-face courses, and their conclusion was that online courses have a number of inherent *'problems'* in terms of evaluation requirements. Since this course will be totally online, and somewhat innovatory in its goals, its evaluation will need to be based on firm principles. Stufflebeam's decision oriented CIPP model [Western Michigan University Evaluation Centre, 2002] is a proven evaluation model, and will effectively provide a basic framework for the evaluation of the course.

The CIPP model

Context Evaluation : *planning decisions*
Input Evaluation : *structuring / designing*

Process Evaluation : *implementation*
Product Evaluation : *recycling*

However, the CIPP model lacks detail, or *'granularity'* [Eseryel, 2002], in that it doesn't address which questions to ask, or who to ask them to. This is particularly true in the Process and Input stages of the evaluation, so the 'Seven Principles of Good Practice' [Chickering & Gamson, 1983] will serve as a basis for these stages.

Good practice :

1. encourages contact between students and faculty.
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
3. encourages active learning.
4. gives prompt feedback.
5. emphasises time on task.
6. communicates high expectations.
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

The Seven Principles were originally written for face to face teaching scenarios, but are equally applicable to online environments. Graham, et al [2000] investigated the extent to which web based distance learning environments actually follow the Seven Principles. Their findings have been used as the framework for the Process and Evaluation checklists for this course.

The nature of online courses (a community of learners ; the lack of face -to-face contact with the tutor resulting in a reliance on scaffolding and feedback) lends itself towards Constructivist learning environments. Though used here to form the basis of the evaluation process, the Seven Principles encapsulate the very essence of Constructivism. Course designers often struggle to find a Constructivist learning theory on which to base the design of a course, and for novice designers in particular this can be a

very onerous task. It is likely that certain stakeholders, university administrators and accreditation bodies for example, will demand that a course be based on a recognised learning theory. For online courses this is particularly difficult, due to the varying demographics and learning styles of the learners, and a course based too rigidly on one particular learning theory is unlikely to succeed. However the Seven Principles provide the flexibility necessary for the design of an online course, and enable the designer to make decisions based on both on theory and pragmatism.

The Evaluation Process

Data will be collected from a number of sources, including :

A thorough examination of the course materials and web site.
Questionnaire completed by tutor at the end of the course.
Questionnaire completed by all learners at the end of the course.
In-depth questionnaire completed by a small number of learners, chosen at random.
Informal conversations and correspondence with the tutor.
Communications between the tutor and learners.
A review of assessment results.
A pragmatic review of the financial viability of the course.
Comparisons with other modules of the MBA.
Questionnaire completed by learners who completed the course at an earlier date.

Rowntree [1992] emphasised the organic nature of evaluation, and that the process shouldn't be compartmentalised, so it is not inappropriate to combine the Process and Input stages of the CIPP model. There is also an overlap between the Context and Product stages, as they both address fundamental questions about the rationale and long -term effectiveness of the course.

CIPP : Context Evaluation

What is the rationale for the course?

What are the characteristics of the intended beneficiaries?

What are the goals and objectives of the course?

Does the design of the course match : the course rationale / the characteristics of the intended beneficiaries / the course goals and objectives?

Is the rationale for the course still valid?

Is the open admission policy a success? Does the minimum TOEIC score need to be changed?

CIPP : Process and Input Evaluation

Questions based on the Seven Principles :

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty.

    Is the email policy explained clearly?

    Is respect shown when responding to learners publicly?

    Are steps taken to build trust with learners (self-introductions, ice -breakers)

    Is private contact via email between tutor and learners encouraged?

    is there a system for detecting, and dealing with, learners who are falling behind?

2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.

    Is there a structured activity for learners to find out about each other?

    Are learners evaluating each others work?

3. Encourages active learning.

    Are learners relating what they learn to real-world issues?

    Are learners providing feedback on each others work?

Do the assignments, and discussion forums, enable learners to challenge the ideas of the tutor and other learners?

4. Gives prompt feedback.

Is there sufficient 'acknowledgement' feedback? (Does the learner receive confirmation of receipt of submitted work?)

Is there sufficient 'information' feedback? (Does the learner receive answers to questions addressed to the tutor, or administration? Are assignment grades sufficiently commented?)

Is there a good turnaround time when grading and returning assignments?

Are assignments structured in such a way that learners can give each other feedback on them?

5. Emphasises time on task.

Is sufficient time being allowed for the completion each assignment?

To ensure learners maintain a regular study schedule, are assignments due throughout the course?

Are learners being informed of the importance of regular work and self-pacing?

6. Communicates high expectations.

Are high expectations being communicated to all learners?

Are expectations made clear in grading rubrics and assignment deadlines?

Is positive feedback being given to maintain motivation, and to communicate the excellence tutors are looking for?

7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Do the learning exercises allow learners to apply diverse perspectives?

Do the learning exercises cater for diverse ways of learning?

Questions specifically addressed to evaluating the discussion forums :

Richardson and Turner [2001] authored specific guidelines, *'written form the perspective of the tutor who is not a technology expert'*, which specifically address best-practice in collaborative learning (discussion forums and discussion oriented assessment). Though not written as an evaluation checklist, the guidelines are suitable for evaluation purposes.

Since the list is quite exhaustive it has not been reproduced here, however it is easily accessible at the link provided in the reference section of this paper. I would encourage anyone contemplating including a discussion forum in a course to review these guidelines, as they walk the course designer through the issues involved in collaborative learning, and serve as a guide to the tutor to actually administer and assess online discussion activities.

Questions specifically addressed to evaluating online elements :

Do all web pages meet recognised design guidelines? There are many guidelines available, and this course will use the 'Guidelines for designing and evaluating the display of information on the web.' [Williams, 2000]

Do all web pages certify as valid HTML/XHTML/CSS? [Markup, CSS Validator]

Do all web pages meet the W3C 'Web Content Accessibility Guidelines' ? [W3C.org]

Do all web pages certify as accessible? [Bobby]

What comments have the learners made about the design of the online elements?

CIPP : Product Evaluation

Were the goals and objectives of the course met?

What changes need to be made for the course to meet the goals and

objectives?

After analysing feedback from the tutor and learners, what changes need to be made to the course?

Are the learners actually transferring their new expertise to their professional context?

Are there any elements of the course which could be applied to other modules of the MBA?

Are there any elements of other modules in the MBA programme which could be applied to the Marketing course?

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