

# Managing Learning and Assessment Concerns in Accelerated Online Programs

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## Abstract

With academic institutions, students, and faculty devoting more attention to, and interest in, accelerated courses/learning through Online programs, there is concomitant increased attention by accrediting associations, organizations that hire graduates of such programs, and graduates themselves as to the course rigor, quality/depth of student learning, and valid assessment of the intended learning. Academic institutions see the opportunity for increased enrollment without an increase in campus facilities. Students appreciate the flexibility in scheduling, the shortened time frame for degree achievement, and the self-paced opportunity. Many professors have mixed feeling about the lack of interaction with, and unchecked interaction between, students thus promoting skepticism about the assurance that desired mandated course content is adequately covered or really absorbed by the students or that assignments submitted are truly the work of the respective student.

Personal experience and discussion with students and other faculty validates the feeling that course content for traditional three credit hour courses, for instance, can not be either adequately absorbed by students or properly facilitated by faculty in an accelerated environment. Time for reflection, time to complete in depth assignments, and inability to handle too many courses at one time often results in the “dummying down” of course content. There is also the verified observation that some students may receive, solicit or use prohibited assistance in writing papers, solving problems, or completing projects.

In addition to the questionable learning from an accelerated program environment is the question of the validity of grades received. Can academic integrity be assured as more instruction or learning is being accomplished out of a classroom environment? With unchecked opportunity for assistance with written assignments and exams through tutors, other students either currently or previously enrolled in the course, or family members are final course grades a true reflection of an individual’s academic ability, competence, knowledge, scholarliness, and understanding of course content or someone else’s? Are the reputations of academic institutions lessened if organizations question the integrity of transcripts in hiring decisions or find the academically degreed bright star on paper is, in reality, severely lacking in the competencies expected and portrayed on paper? Is the academic outcome from an accelerated course comparable to the traditional 15 week, 45 hour contact time structure? Are there solutions satisfactory to the

academic community and the students' needs in an ever changing quest for quality education through the new education initiatives?

### The Issue

Whereas years ago it was correspondence courses that were the alternative to traditional, semester long classroom instruction for many students seeking college degrees, today, riding on the wave of computer and "hurry-up" societal attitudes toward most activities, prospective students and academic institutions are both focusing on methods to accelerate educational instruction. A three semester hour course conducted over sixteen weeks with class meetings one, two, or three days a week of varying class time is now offered in an accelerated or compressed form meeting perhaps one day a week over five weeks with four hours of classroom attendance, or four days a week for two hours daily over five weeks, or completely online over five weeks. Similar to many TV programs that address any problem of magnitude in just one hour with breaks for commercials, new education initiatives are providing opportunities for learning even the most complex academic courses with limited classroom instruction by relying heavily on individual study with minimum instructor input.

For many progressive institutions, compressed online or some form of accelerated course work may soon match or exceed classroom taught classes number wise. Colleges and universities see the enormous potential for attracting students to increase enrollment without the expense of adding costly classrooms and support facilities. With academic institutions, students, and faculty devoting more attention to, and interest in, accelerated courses/learning through online programs, there is concomitant increased attention by accrediting associations, organizations that hire graduates of such programs, and graduates themselves as to the course rigor, quality/depth of student learning, and valid assessment of the intended learning. While the potential looks endless for both the institution and the student, there are perceptible ripples in this new wave of education initiatives that could turn into a tsunami. These ripples are the quality of education received and the validity of assessment.

Accelerated online programs are the new super carriers of education opportunity for a large segment of the population seeking academic degrees. Add to this the attractiveness of such programs and suddenly a whole new market emerges that educational institutions are eager to tap into. While somewhat similar, Distance Education and Online serve separate customers. Distance Education allows a student to deal directly, one-on-one with an instructor by submitting required assignments on regular intervals either by E-mail, fax or U.S. mail. Feedback to the student is generally transmitted in a similar fashion within a pre-determined time frame. If deemed necessary, phone calls may supplement the two-way communication between instructor and student. Distance Education courses are particularly effective where the student can achieve mastery of the course

Some online courses are more similar to classroom instruction with dialoguing between students and between students and faculty, formal written assignments and informal oral assignments all conducted via computers over a traditional 16 week semester. More controversial are the five week accelerated courses being offered.

## Promising horizons

Institutions. A number of colleges and universities have taken the lead in promoting variations in education instruction as a means of finding a new education niche and growing their enrollment (and revenue). Other, perhaps more traditional, institutions of higher education see the potential, react to faculty and administrator urging, and, through various alliances, implement their own programs. There is denying the attractiveness of increased enrollment without the expense of adding classrooms, office space for added faculty, and more student facilities. Faculties are becoming technologically competent in the use of computers for instruction, are ready for a more objective method of teaching without the face-to-face contact with the concomitant face-to-face challenges, and realize that time could be spent more productively working from their office or home rather than traveling to and from, and standing in, classrooms.

Students. . Students appreciate the flexibility in scheduling, the shortened time frame for degree achievement, and the self-paced opportunity. With computers more common place and less expensive, and their usage has been learned in secondary schools, working students and those in locations far removed from available educational institutions find the opportunity to obtain degrees through online much to their liking. Companies were willing to pay the tuition to upgrade their work force, and work schedules that had to be centered or school schedules are one less bothersome detail. The student can receive instruction and submit assignments when time permitted.

There are other advantages, if they can be called advantages, that some students quickly realize. Since students and faculty may be geographically dispersed, and assignment submission times/dates are flexible, it is not difficult to pass off other's work as one's own. Exams or tests, if there are any, along with papers and perhaps a weekly question or two, can easily be accomplished by another person substituting for the enrolled student.

This possibility raises a specter of concern by faculty with regard to integrity of assignments received and the validity of course work assessment. Who is actually doing the work?

### Troublesome eddy currents

As more courses are added to online programs, more instructors become involved. Where solid rapport was established between student and faculty, there is an increase in the feedback to the faculty that is disturbing. The insights should have been expected or anticipated. Unfortunately, while one segment of the academic community is enthralled with the enrollment numbers that are being generated, limited attention is being given to managing the potential downside of the programs evidenced by the feedback. Many professors have mixed feeling about the lack of interaction with, and unchecked interaction between, students thus promoting skepticism about the assurance that desired mandated course content is adequately covered or really absorbed by the students or that assignments submitted are truly the work of the respective student.

Personal experience and discussion with students and other faculty validates the feeling that course content for traditional three credit hour courses, for instance, can not be either adequately absorbed by students or properly facilitated by faculty in an accelerated environment. Time for reflection, time to complete in depth assignments, and inability to handle too many courses at one time often results in the "dummying down" of course content. There is also the verified observation that some students may receive, solicit or use prohibited assistance in writing papers, solving problems, or completing projects.

Either due to their naiveté, honesty, or genuine concern for the perceived quality of their degree in the eyes of employers, other academic institutions, or contemporaries, many students readily admit to, or give the impression that there is a less than honest effort on their part in completing individual course work without outside assistance. Admissions of supplemental help from private tutors, family members, students previously enrolled in the course, or local college instructors are not uncommon.

Some students in quantitative courses have submitted identical problem solutions right down to the layout on the page, identical computational errors and even side bar notations along the margins. Through the recollection of the instructor and comparison, it was discovered the students were from the same distant location (organization) with one having completed the course previously with the same instructor.

Some students brazenly proffer the phrase “cooperate and graduate” without the slightest concern for integrity or remorse for violating the trust of the instructor. As the price of education escalates and organizations place emphasis on grades, there seems to be an attitude of “graduate at all costs”. Integrity is losing ground.

For most online courses, there are graded assignments that the individual is expected to complete on his/her own. Final course grades should reflect an INDIVIDUAL’S academic ability and competence, not a group grade. Is a student’s academic transcript reflecting a true assessment of the student’s knowledge, scholarliness, academic ability, understanding of course contents, skills, and potential or someone else’s?

### Why the concern

Within academe, individual grades are benchmarks of success, of learning outcomes, and serve as standards for comparison. When grades are false indicators of true merit, there are significant ripples affecting people, organizations, decisions, and programs.

Students that diligently work to achieve notable grades have little tolerance for those who achieve similar grades by means other than hard work and concerted application to studying. Morale and respect for the awarded degree take a nose dive when it is felt or observed that students were less than honest in completing assigned work yet graduate along side the others. Academic awards (Cum Laude, Magna Cum Laude and Summa Cum Laude) presented at graduation are a joke when the recipient is known or believed to have used other’s work in completing course requirements.

The value and integrity of transcripts are in jeopardy when there is a lack of assurance that the grades shown may have been awarded without a valid assessment of student learning. Organizations that consider transcripts in hiring decisions may find that the academically qualified, bright star on paper is, in reality, severely lacking in the competencies expected and portrayed by posted grades. It does not take many disappointing hires for an organization to lose faith in the academic institution and the perceived quality of its graduates.

While various entrance exams are used in the selection process for Graduate Schools, undergraduate grades play a role, as does the undergraduate school’s image with regard to academic rigor. Grades and rigor must be based on valid assessment of learning outcome. Even the most demanding program fails to impress in the long run if the assessment of learning is founded on a faulty process of accurately measuring student competency.

### Managing assessment

To assess students in online courses, a variety of methods can be used. There are always the “term” papers, either individually done or by groups, depending on the course. Either way there is no assurance the papers are the creative work of the author. There are some software programs or independent agencies that can help determine whether the papers are original work or derived from others’ work.

Almost any type of exam (multiple choice, true/false, matching or essay) could be administered by computer. For some types, scrambling the questions, placing a “once only” restriction on access, placing a time limit for taking or when an exam may be taken by, or using multiple forms of an exam may act as a modicum of control. None will guarantee the exam is being taken solely by the student in question.

### Managing the issue

Given all that has been discussed, the issue, then, is whether there is a need, or concern, for more stringent means of assessing student learning with subsequent grade determination. Are there methods that satisfy all those involved in, or benefiting from, the new wave of educational instruction with regard to the integrity of the assessment?

In talking with educators from a broad spectrum of disciplines, academic institutions, teaching experience, and attitudes/perspectives, it is apparent there are multiple viewpoints on the issue, its importance, and possible alternatives/solutions.

There are those who:

- Express disbelief that any problem exists or ever has existed with respect to student integrity. The extremists range from those who have never experienced or witnessed “cheating” to those who believe students will seek any means, method or avenue to maximize their grades.
- Feel the assessment process for Online and Distance Education need be no different than traditional classroom procedures. It should be assumed students are basically honest, want to learn, will do their own work, have lofty goals, and will accept the grade earned. Those who are not are in the minority and will eventually show their true knowledge and ability in the work place. Instructors should teach to those who want to learn and not be overly concerned with those looking for shortcuts or easy rides.
- Would do away with grades and leave it wholly up to the student to determine how a grade is administered or at least place more weight on the “process” of learning rather than the final grade. These educators believe grade designators merely reflect achievement of a certain level of proficiency in a course regardless of how often work might be re-submitted for a final grade
- Would put more effort into “training” students regarding ethical practices, plagiarism, moral responsibilities to self and others, and non-toleration of those who are less than honest.
- Finally, who would adopt the most tamper proof, sure fire method of assessing learning outcomes – proctored, competency based exams or, the less used term

today, comprehensive exams given just prior to graduation. It is this latter method that holds the greatest promise for valid assessment yet it is the method least liked by students and most ignored by educators.

For students, comprehensive exams mean one final, hard look at all course materials and texts in preparation for any question that might be included in the exam. For those who might have coasted along with the help of others, especially in Distance Education or Online courses, the moment of truth lies in the comprehensive exam outcome. Detailed knowledge, critical thinking and writing skills, and synthesis and application of the desired learning can all be evaluated. Failure of the comprehensive exam does not need to signal failure. It should signal the need for additional study and, after a prescribed interval, the student should be re-examined.

Instructors and administrators, although in general agreement as to the value of comprehensive exams, are less prone to push for adoption for several reasons.

- It takes time to develop, administer, and evaluate the exams and to do the latter with some degree of consistency, uniformity and objectivity.
- Faculty release time may be needed and this costs dollars.
- There is transference of responsibility for learning from the student to the faculty. If a student does poorly on a comprehensive exam, it is easy to blame the instructor, or quality there of, or threaten to sue the institution.
- It is easy to “dummy down” a program’s rigor to assure high graduation rates, degree completion in four years, and continued high FTE’s than maintain a standard of excellence.
- Low graduation numbers garner more attention from administrators than lower quality. Comprehensive exams that result in denial of graduation to students can create problems of limited enrollment in the future.
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#### Enhancing assessment

If the issue of assessment validity for Distance Education and Online is to be taken seriously, then there needs to be an internal assessment within concerned institutions as to what actions are most appropriate to smooth out the ripple. Simply, there needs to be a commitment to standards of excellence and an evaluation of current processes. A survey of faculty and students done anonymously would help verify whether a problem exists and its extent. Following are possible actions that should be considered to enhance the assessment process.

- Educate students as to expectations regarding plagiarism and academic dishonesty. Place guidelines in Student Handbooks. Stress that faculty include such statement in course syllabi.
- Mandate that students attest on assignments, with a signature, that all work submitted represents the student’s original endeavor or that references are cited where outside sources were used.
- Develop or use existing technological means to verify the identity of students taking tests electronically.
- Utilize computer programs to cross check papers against papers previously submitted by other students.
- Adopt multiple and varied forms of exams.

- Utilize proctored comprehensive exams.
- Enforce administering action for plagiarism.

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