

## **INTEGRATING QUALITY MATTERS© RUBRIC STANDARDS TO IMPROVE ONLINE MARKETING COURSES**

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Online education continues to grow in popularity and prominence. Over 6.1 million students were taking at least one online course in fall 2010, with 31 percent of all higher education students now taking at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In addition, 65 percent of higher education institutions believe online learning is critical to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2011). As a result of online education's growing importance to institutions of higher education, faculty members in marketing and other disciplines are continually addressing and experimenting with how to make the online education experience better for both students and faculty.

The literature concerning online education is extensive and addresses diverse topics such as quality in online education, challenges and issues in implementing online education, and comparisons of online and on-campus courses. The concern in this paper is quality in online education. Its purpose is to describe the efforts to improve two online marketing courses through the integration of Quality Matters (QM) Rubric Standards. The issue of quality in online education is discussed first. Then, the Quality Matters program is summarized. Next, the literature concerning online learning in the marketing classroom is reviewed. Finally, the author's experience with integrating the Quality Matters rubric standards is described, focusing on the revamping of two online marketing courses, an undergraduate Database Marketing course and a graduate Marketing Management course. The paper concludes with the author's plans for further continual improvement efforts in these courses as well as other online marketing courses, and suggestions for future research.

## Quality in the Online Classroom

The literature on quality in online education is growing, but the issue of what constitutes “quality” in an online course is not clear and empirical investigations are limited (Fresen, 2002; McGorry, 2003; Sonwalkar, 2002). Some researchers have compared student performance in online and on-campus courses, while others have measured student satisfaction and/or learning in attempting to determine “quality” (Arbaugh, 2000; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997).

In addressing the gap in defining and empirically measuring quality, McGorry (2003) developed a model to measure quality and learning in online courses. Based on a literature review of studies that addressed effectiveness of online courses, McGorry’s (2003) model includes flexibility, responsiveness and student support, student learning, interaction, technology and technical support, and student satisfaction as important constructs in evaluating quality and learning in online courses. The author developed a 60-item scale and, after subjecting it to pilot testing and item analysis, concluded that a four-factor model may represent quality in online learning including course organization/student learning, student learning/interaction/delivery mode, quality/interaction, and a fourth factor not clearly defined because it represented a variety of items. Clearly, this model needs more detailed analyses and further testing to clarify what constitutes “quality” in online learning.

Anitsal, Anitsal, Barger, Fidan, & Allen (2010) described a “Quality Enhancement Program” at Tennessee Tech University designed to “improve the quality of student learning” (Anitsal et al., 2010, p. 42). Quality was assessed in terms of creativity, teamwork, critical thinking, and real life problem solving abilities of students. Given the mean scores for each objective at the conclusion of several courses, Anitsal et al. (2010) concluded that the Quality Enhancement Program implementation was successful.

“Quality Matters (QM) is a faculty-centered, peer review process that is designed to certify the quality of online and blended courses” (<http://www.qmprogram.org/>). The QM Program is growing and being adopted by an increasing number of institutions of higher education (either formally or informally). Its efforts to address issues of quality are led by faculty and it offers a comprehensive and convenient way for faculty to develop or improve their online courses.

### The Quality Matters™ Program Rubric

Quality Matters was developed by MarylandOnline by faculty to improve student learning. QM offers a subscription service whereby higher education institutions receive tools and training for quality assurance of online courses. “Colleges and universities across the country use the tools in developing, maintaining and reviewing their online courses and in training their faculty” (<http://www.qmprogram.org/higher-education-program>). About 10 percent of institutions of higher education in the United States subscribe to the QM Program (<http://www.qmprogram.org/higher-education-program>).

Specifically, the QM Program mission is “to promote and improve the quality of online education and student learning through:

1. Development of research-supported, best practice-based quality standards and appropriate evaluation tools and procedures.
2. Recognition as experts in online education quality assurance and evaluation.
3. Fostering institutional acceptance and integration of QM standards and processes into organizational improvement efforts focused on improving the quality of online education.
4. Provision of faculty development training in the use of QM rubric(s) and other quality practices to improve the quality of online/hybrid courses.

5. Provision of quality assurance through the recognition of quality in online education” (<http://www.qmprogram.org/our-mission>).

The QM Rubric is one component of the QM Program. Comprised of eight general and 41 specific standards (<http://www.qmprogram.org/rubric>), the QM Rubric is used by more than 400 colleges and universities to develop, maintain and review online and blended courses and to train faculty (<http://www.qmprogram.org/higher-education-program>). The eight general standards include:

1. Course Overview and Introduction (Standards 1.1 – 1.8)
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies) (Standards 2.1 – 2.5)
3. Assessment and Measurement (Standards 3.1 – 3.5)
4. Instructional Materials (Standards 4.1 – 4.6)
5. Learner Interaction and Engagement (Standards 5.1 – 5.4)
6. Course Technology (Standards 6.1 – 6.5)
7. Learner Support (Standards 7.1 – 7.4)
8. Accessibility (Standards 8.1 – 8.4)

For each general standard, several specific standards exist. For example, for the Course Overview and Introduction general standard, eight specific standards exist (such as Standard 1.5 – Prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated). An institution of higher education may choose to have official course reviews conducted by a team of reviewers. Courses that successfully meet the QM Rubric standards in an official course review are eligible for QM recognition (<http://www.qmprogram.org/reviews>). Much scholarly research informed and supported the development of the 2011-2013 QM Rubric, and this research is summarized at <http://www.qmprogram.org/lit-review-2011-2013-rubricpdf/download/QM%20Lit%20Review%20for%202011-2013%20Rubric.pdf>.

Limited research has been published to demonstrate how to incorporate QM rubric standards into new or existing online or blended courses. For example, Pollacia and McCallister

(2009) present ways in which Web 2.0 technologies may be used to meet QM standards. To meet 2008-2010 Standards 1.4 - Self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online and 1.5 - Students are requested to introduce themselves to the class, Pollacia and McCallister (2009) suggest students complete an "All About Me" exercise in a discussion board, on a Facebook page, or using the website ToonDoo (<http://www.toondoo.com/>) to create cartoon characters to introduce themselves.

### The Online Learning Environment in Marketing Courses

Malhotra (2002, pp. 3-4) wrote, "as the use of instructional technology in marketing education is gaining momentum, there is an urgent need to address the important issues that such integration entails." One of those identified by Malhotra (2002) is using technology in distance learning-based marketing courses. A great number of studies exist that have studied the online learning environment in marketing courses. Close, Dixit & Malhotra (2005) provide a synthesis of 77 articles concerning marketing and the Internet, eleven of which address distance learning courses. More recently, Arbaugh, Godfrey, Johnson, Pollack, Niendorf & Wresch (2009) provide a comprehensive literature review of research from 2000-2008 in selected business journals on online and blended learning in the business disciplines, including marketing. Their review categorizes marketing studies into three categories: course overviews and instructor narrative accounts, classroom comparison studies, and studies that identify predictors of course outcomes in online learning environments.

Even though the literature is expansive, marketing educators still grapple with several challenges. For example, Granitz and Greene (2003) outlined the challenges facing marketing educators in teaching online. A variety of challenges face faculty, including a possible dislike or fear of technology, a lack of awareness of the attention and engagement of students, a need for training without relief from other responsibilities to free up time, and a need to incorporate activities which some faculty do not traditionally like to implement (e.g., student interaction,

independent study activities). Other challenges include course content being compatible with online delivery and students. Granitz and Greene (2003) presented seven e-marketing strategic themes to meet these challenges. For example, to meet some of the faculty challenges, the authors propose that universities use strategies of disintermediation and customization to form alliances with other institutions of higher education.

### Integrating Quality Matters Rubric Standards into Online Marketing Courses

The author's university has used online education to attract new students and increase overall enrollment. In fall 2011, 4,504 students were considered "virtual students," with 12,802 total students. Thus, about 35 percent of the university's total enrollment is the online student body. The university has a "virtual college" designed to serve both faculty and students teaching and learning in the online setting. Though not a subscriber to the QM Program, the university is implementing a localized QM standard review.

The marketing and MBA programs are offered both on-campus and online. Generally, a faculty member will teach 1-2 courses per semester, with one section of a course being on-campus and another section being online (for a teaching load of four courses per semester). In an effort to improve the quality of two online marketing courses, the author revamped the courses by integrating some of the Quality Matters rubric standards. The first course, Database Marketing, is an eight-week summer undergraduate course, while the second course is a graduate-level Marketing Management course for MBA students taught in the fall semester. Blackboard is the course management system used at the author's university.

### Course Improvements and Alignment with QM Rubric Standards

Organize course materials by learning modules. In both courses, a major change in the course interface and navigation was to transition from "Course Materials" to "Learning Modules." Instead of providing a set of course materials on a chapter-by-chapter basis, learning modules

chunked chapters together and were used to present more comprehensive content in a sequential manner. Each learning module consists of four sections: 1) Introduction (including learning objectives for each chapter that are consistent with course objectives specified in the course syllabus); 2) Learning Resources (including the textbook reading assignment, chapter summaries, PowerPoint presentations, and additional relevant materials); 3) Interaction (including discussion board activities, case assignment, and team designations); and, 4) Practice and Assessment (including practice and graded quizzes). This improvement aligned with three QM Rubric Standards: QM 2.2 - The module/unit learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives; QM 4.2 - The purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are clearly explained; and QM 6.3 - Navigation throughout the online components of the course is logical, consistent, and efficient.

Provide a learning modules framework. To get students familiar with learning modules, a depiction of the content and sequence of the learning modules was provided in the Course Introduction and Orientation. This improvement aligned with QM Rubric Standard 4.2 - The purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are clearly explained.

Identify a starting place in the online course. In Database Marketing, a “Start Here” Blackboard menu was added that included a Course Introduction and Orientation learning module. This improvement aligned with QM Rubric Standard 1.1 - Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.

Create an orientation to the course. The Course Introduction and Orientation learning module included the following components: a welcome (with textbook information and a description of the first week’s class assignments), the course syllabus (in PDF format), a

learning module overview, discussion board guidelines, and instructions for downloading Respondus/LockDown Browser for test-taking. This improvement aligned with QM Rubric Standard QM 1.2 - Students are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.

Develop and provide a summary of course expectations. Students were informed of course expectations through the course syllabus and in learning modules. The course syllabus states the course purpose and structure, required prerequisites, and technical skills and software required to be used in the course. In the Course Introduction and Orientation learning module, guidelines for netiquette are described. These improvements aligned with four QM Rubric Standards: QM 1.2 - Students are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course; QM 1.3 - Etiquette expectations (sometimes called “netiquette”) for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are stated clearly; QM 1.5 - Prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated; QM 1.6 - Minimum technical skills expected of the student are clearly stated; and QM 6.4 - Students can readily access the technologies required in the course.

Provide instructor contact information and contact procedure. In each course syllabus and on the Blackboard site, students were provided instructor contact information (office, phone, email) and a short biography of the instructor. The faculty member also introduced herself on a “Course Introduction” Blackboard discussion board. This improvement aligned with QM Rubric Standard QM 1.7 - The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and available online.

Facilitate and increase student interaction and engagement. In both courses, discussion boards were used to facilitate student interaction. While discussion boards were used in previous semesters, the importance and feedback were more prominent when the courses were revamped. “The Boardroom” is a general discussion board where students can post and discuss issues, either class-related or not. A “Course Introduction” during the first week of class required



all students to introduce themselves and discuss their motivations for taking the course, where they are from, and their work experience, career aspirations and any interesting life experiences that they wanted to share. Then, on a weekly basis, students were required to participate in module-relevant discussions, providing a post and response to another student's post.

In Database Marketing, a comprehensive case analysis was incorporated into required assignments. On Blackboard, a "learning module" was created to present the components of the assignment. Students were required to use Google Docs as their collaboration tool. In Marketing Management, teams of students participated in case analyses and an online simulation. To facilitate the teams' interaction, groups were established in Blackboard. Group functions available to the teams (where access to the functions are limited to the specific group members) included live chats, file exchange, blogs, discussion boards, journals, tasks, Wikis, and email. These improvements aligned with four QM Rubric Standards: QM 1.8 - Students are asked to introduce themselves to the class; QM 5.2 - Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning; QM 5.3 - The instructor's plan for classroom response time and feedback on assignments is clearly stated; and QM 5.4 - The requirements for student interaction are clearly articulated.

Set student expectations for learning. Expectations for learning were established through course and chapter learning objectives. In the course syllabus, course learning objectives are provided. In the Introduction section of each learning module, learning objectives for each chapter are provided. These improvements aligned with two QM Rubric Standards: QM 2.1 - The course learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable; and QM 2.5 - The learning objectives are appropriately designed for the level of the course.

Provide clear assessment policies and procedures. Grading policies and procedures for both courses are included in the course syllabi. Also, in both courses, a Discussion Board

Grading Rubric was developed and utilized. The rubric includes 6 criteria: critical thinking/command of course material, connections, uniqueness, promotion of discussion, timeliness and stylistics. For each criterion, specific points describe what constitutes “excellent,” “passing,” and “failing.” The use of the rubric allowed students to understand better what is expected of posts and responses, and how a specific score is determined. The rubric was provided in the course syllabus and in the Course Introduction and Orientation learning module. These improvements aligned with two QM Rubric Standards: QM 3.2 – The course grading policy is clearly stated; and QM 3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of students’ work and participation and are tied to the course grading policy.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to describe the efforts to improve two online marketing courses through the integration of Quality Matters Rubric Standards. Several improvements to both online courses, Database Marketing and Marketing Management, were incorporated that align with specific 2011-2013 QM Rubric Standards. While the author is pleased with the improvements, much room exists for further course improvements and scholarly research.

The course improvements thus far align with 18 out of 41 specific QM Rubric Standards. More than half of the specific standards have not been addressed and are yet to be aligned with course improvements, or are not applicable to the author’s courses. Plans for course improvements include an FAQs section on Blackboard, an Online Help Desk resource, and the incorporation of accessibility technologies. These improvements would allow alignment with additional specific standards, particularly those that are part of the general standards Course Overview and Introduction, Course Technology, Learner Support, and Accessibility. Certainly other specific standards will need to be addressed as well. In the future, the author would like to undergo an official course review by a QM Program peer review team.

The incorporation of QM Rubric Standards into online courses leads to many possibilities for scholarly research. For example, the author's intent is to eventually address empirically the question of whether the incorporation of the rubric standards impact student learning and satisfaction.

References Available Upon Request