

Distance Courses Quality: a Learner's View

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Abstract

Distance course quality is considered as a vector of its characteristics from a learner's viewpoint. Course metadata should incorporate descriptions that may be matched to the learner's requirements, thus quality measure will be user-specific and reflect didactic, technical, interaction features together with accommodation and purpose correspondence. Suggested methods of cumulative quality estimation based on resource's quality vector may be used for individual selection of learning resource.

1. Introduction

To foster the development of distance learning market, it is essential to present objective and detailed information on educational services and products to all potential customers. Matching customer's needs to the features of learning product or service is actually learning quality evaluation, as according to the ISO definition "quality is an ability of a set of integral features of product, system, or process to meet requirements of a customer and other interested parties". When interpreted for e-learning, the definition of quality contains two concepts that are not further elaborated: "customer" and "requirements". The course production may be purchased by the University, learning process supported by the state funds, a learner would be a primary user, but the results of learning may be evaluated by the employer. It is obvious, that administration, teachers, students, and employers have different requirements, priorities and criteria.

Quality standards roughly may be considered as process-directed and product-directed. Process directed approaches focus on transparency and consistency of

product creation and delivery processes and other services. Product-oriented quality standards deals with result and determine quality of a product by clearly defined lists of requirements and criteria. Besides, some standards determine criteria for learners' skills and knowledge assessment and use them to evaluate quality.

European quality observatory (EQO) creates a framework for classification of all existing approaches to quality assessments, and offers methods for their description and comparison. Its open database with descriptions of e-learning quality assessment methods and tools is a key resource for all e-learning organizations interested in quality control and assessment [1].

2. Quality issues for learners

Meeting quality criteria means that certain e-learning product or service will guarantee a certain level of results, which may be true on the average, but not for every learner. The reason is that learning process is different for every learner, they are in specific initial conditions, the same information is acquired and interpreted individually, and although importance of individualization and personalization is widely recognized, it is not always addressed in specific products. Thus, what is good for one, may be inefficient or inappropriate for another, and quality criteria based on "average customer" are not enough.

Need for adequate course descriptions and ability to evaluate quality of the offered products may be demonstrated using Ukraine as example. Educational system of Ukraine is in transformation for a number of years, along with state supported Universities with well-established but often outdated curricula there are a number of private commercial establishments, marketing their modern programs and connections with western

Universities. There is a growing tendency to obtain a diploma from a certified University and add to it some courses – or another diploma - that would be helpful for employment and professional growth.

The choice is complicated by the fact that there are not enough graduates that may share their impressions on the quality and usefulness of learning in new educational bodies. Marketing information is often imprecise and incomplete, and lack of established terminology leads to the use of buzz-words to name different concepts and approaches.

To identify essential features that determine a learner's choice, we run a survey among the Master course students of the IRTC. The students have different learning background, professional positions, and goals to obtain a Master's degree. Their age range is 21-36 and they represent a good sample of life-long learners who may benefit from distance courses. The proposed quality metadata system is based on their answers and represents a first draft, not yet completed. In the educational space, it fills the place for learner-friendly descriptions that are essential for further development of learning objects repositories, and may be used for pilot implementation and field tests.

Quality metadata fall into the following groups:

1. Learning goals: learning objectives and tasks, curricula and certificates.
2. Instructors and experts: their duties, qualification, and way of interaction.
3. Target audience: required knowledge and skills, prior education or professional background, learning groups and interaction.
4. Learning environment: required hard and software, additional plug-ins, complexity of environment, navigation, help, assessment instruments and feedback.
5. Learning resources: types of resources, availability on/off line, variety of representation, composition and complexity, types of activity offered, learning material completeness.

The vocabularies for each group of features are being developed, including both names and value spaces, together with guidelines for evaluation of the corresponding feature. To fill in the quality metadata fields, one may use a method of integral analysis of users' requests offered for resources collections [2]. A system for individual quality evaluation will be available through educational portal and be based on descriptions of distance courses offered in Ukrainian educational space.

3. Multidimensional quality description

Quality of a learning resource is considered as a vector of its characteristics, which is formed for each learner individually. To obtain the values for this vector, two mechanisms are used:

- some vector values are calculated based on objective data in the resource's metadata fields;
- other values are evaluated based on former assessments of users with similar preferences;

Quality control systems usually set up limitations to the range of values that parameters of evaluated object may take. They cannot take all specific user requirements into account and set up a kind of threshold, within which the "quality objects" may be very different from the user's viewpoint. The purpose of detailed features distance courses description is not to "raise a plank" but assist learners to find a product answering his/her needs and goals.

We suggest to keep quality evaluation multi-dimensional, according to the parameters identified as important by the user, and offer some integration methods for these dimensions to combine independent and dependent parameters and range the resulting products. These parameters will be further named "quality metadata" and will actually be a part of metadata for a course or derived from the metadata of its components. Part of them may fit into a standard schema, others will be designed as extensions.

The quality metadata may be used to measure correspondence of a course (product and service) to the needs and expectations of a student and thus determine the course's quality from a learner's prospective. These measurements may include calculations of specific parameters on demand, mapping between certain scales or vocabularies etc.

4. Conclusion

Proposed approach is aimed at evaluation of e-learning quality by matching learners' requirements to the descriptions of learning courses, which include essential features described in a formalized manner. Providing quality metadata for educational products and services may increase preciseness, appropriateness and reliability of information for customers and thus raise their trust in technology-enriched educational services. Suggested methods of cumulative quality estimation based on resource's quality vector may be used for individual selection of learning resource.

5. References

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