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## And Finally... Course Quality or Instructional Quality

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# Course Quality or Instructional Quality

**Michael Simonson**

Quality has become a popular word in distance education literature. Quality this, and quality that, all demanding that distance education, online learning, or virtual schooling must “have” something called quality—most often course quality.

This is great, but so what?

There is also an inference that if a series of metrics somehow related to quality, and

course quality, are measured positively then the course is good, or at least good enough. Some even say that a quality course is an excellent course.

Let’s pause and examine the idea of quality. Quality is defined as something that is suitable for its intended purpose, while satisfying expectations. By applying this definition, one could infer that course quality means that a quality course is one that is suitable and satisfies expectations. This does not seem to be an overly high standard to set as a goal.

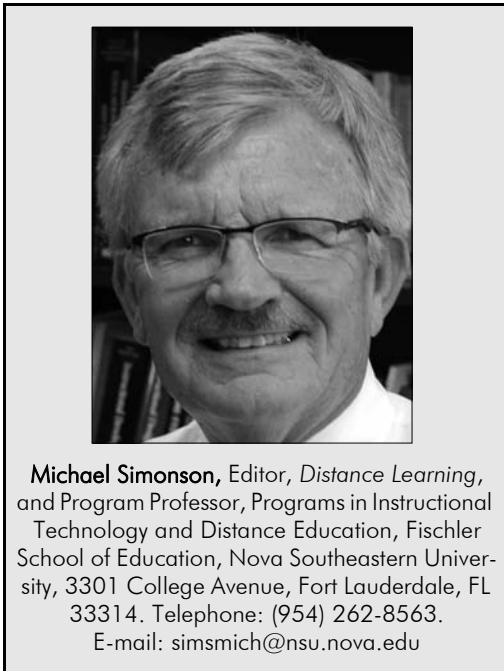
Also, attempts have been made to operationally define what constitutes a quality course. These attempts often use guidelines, scorecards, lists, or check-offs. Scores that are obtained from scorecards, for example, are then used during evaluation of courses to determine if the course is a quality course.

It seems that something is missing.

Perhaps, additional questions should be asked, such as, is course quality the same as instructional quality, and can quality be measurable in any reasonable way?

Certainly, it is permissible to operationally define words like quality, and even words like love, beauty, even personality. Attempts to define these words usually list relevant characteristics that can be

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measured. Phrases like mission central, devotion, square jaw, and pleasing smile are used. To be sure, some will always say, "I don't know how to measure it, but I know it when I see it."

When it comes to quality in distance education there is also a tendency to count things, such as the number of counselors, or the persistence rate, or the length of the welcome video. A more sophisticated approach to measure quality uses categories of what is measured. For example, quality courses should be based on standards, should collect data, offer technology support, provide learner assistance, and involve faculty. And, certainly instructional design is the critical element. Actually, the

simplest list only identifies three elements—content, design, and instruction.

Scorecards and checklists are first steps used by organizations to improve their courses. However, what is really needed are exemplary courses delivering exemplary instruction designed to high standards. Standards are needed for quality instruction and quality instruction begins with quality courses—and of course, we all will "know it when we see it!"

*And finally*, Shakespeare loved the word quality and used it often, and wrote in *Julius Caesar* "I am constant as the northern star, of whose tru-fix'd and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament." Now, this *is* a high standard!