

Developing a Quality Matters-Informed Peer Review Program

PRAC Assessment Grant Final Report

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I. PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

A. Summary

In Spring 2015, the Indiana University McKinney School of Law launched its new online education program, McKinney Law Online, with the delivery of three fully-asynchronous online courses. Several more courses were rolled out to McKinney law students in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016. McKinney Law Online now boasts 16 online courses and is increasing its offerings at a steady rate.

As we increased our online presence, we identified four related concerns that needed addressing:

1. Instructors and course designers recognized that we lacked a model was to guide the review of new online courses prior to their being taught. Distance learning in the law school context is new, with the result that the law faculty had limited familiarity with what content and activities reflected pedagogical best practices.
2. This reflects a particular concern because we have an institutionalized and required peer review process for all courses taught prior to faculty's achieving tenure or long-term contract status. Faculty approaching tenure or long-term contract votes are counseled to seek broad participation among the tenured and long-term contract faculty. The result is that while approximately 1/3 of the faculty is in some way involved in online teaching, *all* faculty members might be required at some point to review an online course.

3. The Academic Affairs Committee, charged with reviewing course proposals including those for online or hybrid courses, has a membership that reflects the faculty's diversity, including the diversity of experience with online teaching methods.
4. The accrediting agency for law schools, the American Bar Association (ABA), has recently imposed an additional requirement that law schools articulate learning outcomes and assessing students to determine success in meeting those outcomes. The ABA has also given substantial attention to the use of online teaching in the Juris Doctor program. As we develop increasing numbers of online courses through McKinney Law Online, it is essential that we heed the ABA standards in terms of outcomes and assessment as well as core course design principles for online courses.

We sought this grant from the Program Review and Assessment Committee to develop a method for peer review of online courses (1) prior to their initial presentation and (2) as part of the institutionalized pre-tenure and pre-long-term contract process for peer review of teaching. The peer review method would ensure that all faculty members, including those professors who have had the benefit of extensive course design assistance as well as those with no experience in online teaching methods would be well-equipped to assess the effectiveness of courses and the effectiveness of colleagues as online teachers.

Thus, this project aimed to develop by December 2015 a peer review model that could be institutionalized to aid faculty in assessing teacher effectiveness and student learning in the law school's online courses.

B. Description of the Review Model

The McKinney Law Online peer review model is rooted in Quality Matters, a proprietary rubric created to evaluate the design quality of an online course. Indiana University has contracted with Quality Matters and we understand that there is a university-wide goal of Quality Matters certification of many courses in the Indiana University Online offerings. Full Quality Matters review is a costly and burdensome endeavor that is ill-suited to the initial course development process, to committee review of course proposals, and to faculty peer review of pre-tenure and pre-long-term contract faculty teaching effectiveness.

1. Quality Matters-inspired Peer Review

In consultation with course designers and teaching experts from e-Learning Design Services and the IUPUI Center for Teaching and Learning, the project directors have produced, piloted, and improved an abbreviated Quality Matters-based peer review process. After initial training in the Quality Matters peer review method, the project leaders have adopted the eight General Standards for peer review of online courses produced through McKinney Law Online. Those eight standard inquire:

1. Overview and Introductions

- Reviewers visiting the course website seek the response to the question, "What happens on the first day of class?"

2. Learning Objectives

- Reviewers inquire about the desired learning outcomes from the course and its subparts -- modules or units -- including whether those objectives "ladder" appropriately.
3. **Assessment**
 - Reviewers look for evidence of assessments tied to the objectives. The assessments should produce evidence that the students are mastering the course content.
 4. **Instructional Materials**
 - Reviewers investigate the course materials, including lectures and readings, inquiring whether they are comprehensive, support the objectives, and prepare students for the assessments. General Standards 2, 3 and 4 speak to the goal of "alignment" between the objectives, assessments, and lessons.
 5. **Interaction and Engagement**
 - Reviewers look for opportunities to practice learning and appropriate engagement (1) between the instructor and the students, (2) among students, and (3) between the students and the course content.
 6. **Technology**
 - Reviewers investigate the technology used in the course website, inquiring whether it is appropriate, easy, and helpful. Reviewers are alert to the concern that the technology might be employed simply because it is interesting or new without appropriate attention to its pedagogical benefits.
 7. **Learner Support**
 - Reviewers look for areas of confusion regarding student support for issues involving technology, course content, and administrative problems that may arise.
 8. **Accessibility**
 - Reviewers look for attention in the course design accessibility for students with adaptive learning needs.

2. QM-Inspired Review in Practice

a) *Structured Review*

In responding to these questions based on the eight General Standards, the peer reviewer is encouraged to write observations as well as recommendations for improvement. Reviewers work in a prepared form listing the General Standards with a brief description of each. The form can be made available to the reviewer in advance of the review period or may be maintained in a portion of the course website that is accessible only to faculty. The peer reviewer is asked both to recognize both (1) what he or she sees in the course that is particularly excellent and (2) what he or she sees that may need improvement. When mentioning an area for improvement, the reviewer is asked to cite specific examples from the course materials and to make specific recommendations for change.

Peer reviewers conducting peer reviews of online courses at Indiana University McKinney School of Law are paired up either formally by the online teaching faculty and staff

or informally. The reviews are shared with both with other faculty and with course designers. Through that process of dissemination, McKinney Law Online is moving toward a collective wisdom of pedagogical best practices in online law teaching. More work remains to be done to reach a conclusion on a "signature pedagogy" for online law teaching.

Early uses of the QM-inspired peer review framework have also included a debrief session led by the Center for Teaching and Learning and including both peer reviewers and teaching faculty. The debrief provides opportunities (1) to trouble-shoot the review process, (2) to explain findings and suggestions, and (3) to brainstorm improvements for immediate implementation or future experimentation. Debrief sessions have proved to be tremendously valuable in bringing together faculty to work toward course and program improvement.

b) Timing

Pre-launch review proceeds according to a prescribed schedule. Based on three review sessions (Spring Semester 2015, Fall Semester 2015, and Spring Semester 2016), the project directors have learned that review must take place both close enough to the launch that courses are ready to be showcased and far enough from the launch to allow faculty and designers to implement suggested improvements. For Spring Semester launches, reviews should take place beginning just before the Thanksgiving holiday. For Fall Semester launches, reviews should take place beginning at the very beginning of August. Reviewers should complete their reviews within three weeks of gaining access to an online course.

c) Peer Reviews of Teaching for P&T Purposes

Reviews that are conducted as part of a peer review of teaching necessarily operate with less structure and on an informal timeline. As distinct from pre-launch reviews, which evaluate course design, teaching peer reviews should evaluate both course design and teaching effectiveness. Course observations should be conducted during the semester when the course is being taught. For this reason, they are not appropriately conducted together with the pre-launch reviews.¹

Timing as well as conduct of the peer reviews of teaching for P&T purposes is less formal. Faculty charged with conducting such peer reviews as a matter of institutional practice have discretion with regard to when and for how long they will conduct their review. This relates to timing only: the conclusions here regarding best practices for a Quality Matters-inspired peer review of course design should be followed for teaching peer reviews as well.

3. Product

The project directors have established this Quality Matters-inspired peer review model in three steps:

1. understanding and disseminating the essentials of Quality Matters;
2. providing quality feedback and recommendations to colleagues; and

¹ In Spring 2015, Project Director Max Huffman engaged in QM-inspired review prior to launch of the courses of Project Directors Margaret Ryznar and Yvonne Dutton, and then proceeded also to conduct a peer review of teaching for P&T purposes. The reviews served separate purposes, however.

3. coordinating informal peer reviews among online teaching faculty.

To further these goals of the grant project, the project directors have worked with law school administration, IUPUI campus and Indiana University support to make the following resources available to the Indiana University McKinney Law Faculty:

- A member of the law school staff, educated in online pedagogy as well as technology resources, has been seconded at approximately 30% FTE to the McKinney Law Online program to facilitate the peer review project. Project directors have trained this staff member in the QM-inspired review process and goals;
- The project directors have written into the model course proposal for online courses an encouragement that online courses be subjected to the QM-inspired review prior to initial launch;
- The project directors have composed a manual to guide law faculty in assessing the effectiveness of online courses in enhancing student learning. This manual includes:
 - A template for faculty to use in doing a QM-inspired peer review of an online course;
 - The most recent full copy of the Quality Matters Rubric Standards;
 - A sample QM-inspired peer review;
- The project directors have established a cloud-based folder has been made accessible to the law faculty containing the following materials:
 - A video recording of a tutorial on QM-inspired peer review conducted according to the procedures we outline here;
 - Copies of QM-inspired reviews done in past semesters;
- The project directors have arranged with Center for Teaching and Learning leadership to conduct new course reviews under CTL leadership on an ongoing basis;
- Project Director Max Huffman is in continued discussions with CTL and eDS over a twice-yearly, formalized review schedule, as part of a "Continuous Innovation and Improvement" program.

It is the goal of the project directors that Indiana University McKinney Law Faculty will use these resources both (1) to complete peer reviews of new or existing online courses and (2) to continue the pursuit of a signature pedagogy for online teaching in law schools. Through a continual process of QM-inspired review, reporting and improvement from that review, and future development based on the reporting, the project directors are confident that the QM-inspired peer review process will produce continual innovation and improvement in online teaching through McKinney Law Online.

II. Data Collection Methods & Analysis of the Findings

A. Data Collection

To inform the McKinney Law Online Quality Matters-inspired peer review model, the project directors have conducted informal QM assessments of their own course content in their Spring 2015 course offerings, and many of the courses since then. Self- and peer-assessments required the project directors to assess their own courses using questions developed according to the Quality Matters standards, tailored to ensure that they best serve the purposes of assessing course quality in light of a particular course and its learning outcomes.

The program implemented with the support of this grant has led to a pre-launch or pre-innovation peer review of 8 of 16, or 50%, of the online classes offered through McKinney Law Online. We have maintained the results of those reviews. A follow-on project, tentatively scheduled to be completed in Spring 2017, will involve culling those results for a list of best practices for course design that can be disseminated both internally to the McKinney School of Law as well as through scholarship targeting a general audience.

B. Findings

Based on eight peer reviews conducted to date, the project directors conclude that the General Standards serve the purpose of ensuring robust and quality course design preparatory to the initial launch of the course. Courses subjected to the QM-inspired peer review process have proved to be highly successful in their initial presentation and easily amenable to continual innovation and improvement.

In addition, we are tentatively confident that the General Standards effectively track student perception of course quality and effectiveness. For example, the student experience in first signing onto an online course, which the first of the General Standards addresses, is an essential part of an instructor's setting the tone for the rest of the semester. Two pedagogical best practices that emerged from our review process are (1) the inclusion of a prominent "Start Here" button on the home page and (2) a short checklist of items for students to be sure to tackle before the formal beginning of semester classes. These lessons have informed later recommendations for ongoing course design.

III. Challenges

The project directors have encountered a few challenges in launching this project. Those have been resolved satisfactorily.

The main challenges were the newness of online law teaching and the framework of ABA requirements relating to it. The project directors worked with the law library librarians to find and read all available literature on online law teaching and ABA expectations, and worked together to integrate them in the project's approach.

Another challenge in doing this project was the dynamic nature of the field of online teaching. As new findings are made regarding new technologies or techniques, the manual will be updated and new programming, such as brown bag lunches, will be scheduled for the faculty. The law librarians are invaluable in keeping the project directors updated, as is the law school staff member devoted to the school's online efforts.

Despite these initial challenges, the project directors view the findings from this project as essential to the McKinney Law Online's ability to maintain a program delivering robust and quality courses and educational experiences to students that both engage those students and enhance their learning.