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ABSTRACT

If open learning programs are to become accepted, they must be successfully evaluated according to the traditional standards of cost effectiveness and compatibility with revered educational practices. Currently, open programs are being discouraged by tight funding and by a reemphasis of basic skills and career preparation. The goals of open education usually include one or both of the following: (1) to teach traditional subjects in more interesting ways; and/or (2) to stimulate personal development through the learning experience. Because open learning permits the consumer to determine the quality of his education through individual choice, it is the obligation of the open educator to inform the consumer by: (1) stating program goals; (2) revealing the results of program effectiveness; and (3) communicating a sense of educational purpose. (EMH)

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"Assuring" the Quality of Open Learning

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Over the past decade, thousands of educators, students and their parents have embraced varied doctrines of 'open learning'. Its advocates have captured the educational spotlight and monopolized much of the rhetoric of innovation. Creativity, spontaneity, inquisitiveness and individuality are the 'codewords' that characterize open learning processes and outcomes. Open entry and exit in higher education suggests second chance opportunities for adults who want or need additional schooling. The opposite regimentation, routine, boredom and conformity--are the terms often used to describe the 'traditional classroom.

Open learning, in whatever manner it is defined, has both broad philosophic and visceral appeal. Unlike technical improvements in the educational process, innovations such as open learning appeal to fundamental juged by somewhat different standards. The technical innovation--a

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reading curriculum, a computer accounting system, and the like, are usually evaluated in terms of their cost and effectiveness. The systemic change on the other hand as one might term 'open learning'--is more typically scrutinized in terms of its compatibility with revered educational and social values. This difference explains why initiatives that ride the crest of populas imagination are capable of rapedly acquiring adherents, and conversely, having them.

I will argue that the prospects for long term durability and stability in open learning will be if such programs are encouraged to abandon their experimental status and move into the mainstream of educational institutions. To do so requires that open learning programs be judged by some of the same standards of quality used to assess more traditional offerings. In short term, programs whoes appeal is strictly philosophical, and who are unable to satisfy additional quality criteria, may fall by the wayside. Over the long run, the remaining programs may shed the partially negative image with which they are suspiciously viewed by elements in the academic establishment.

Although various open learning programs are growing, they are simultaneously encountering stiffer opposition.

In part, this represents the natural swing of the educational pendulum. It normally takes a while for any alternative approach to find its proper niche in the educational marketplace. However other factors--primarily economic--also seem to be having an effect on the current status of open learning programs. At a time of tight budgets among educational institutions, all programs get more carefully scrutinized. With incremental budgeting strategies, expenditures for recently adopted programs or ones under consideration receive the greatest resistance. As a relatively new phenomena, the open learning program benefits least under such conditions.

There also seems to be a change in tastes among students. Because the job market is tight, students are increasingly attracted to those courses that provide a 'marketable skill'. The growth areas in higher education are business, engineering and other technical fields. Open learning advocates offer some programs which involve students in workplace experiences, but these are primarily intended to explore career opportunities rather than acquire skills in preparation for a specific job or career. Lastly, open learning is being challenged by citizens calling for a return to 'basics'.

Though as diffuse in its objectives as has been the open learning emphasis, the 'back to basics' philosophy is attracting adherents, and no doubt, will siphon resources that might go open learning programs.

In some ways, these challenges represent a healthy opportunity for proponents of open learning to reassess their position. Issues of 'quality control' are most forcefully raised after periods of initial enthusiasm give way to constructive questioning of assumptions and claims.

The requirements to insure the quality of open learning--the assigned topic of this session--cannot be answered any more easily than one can discuss the determinants of quality in any complex educational enterprise. The values and tastes that comprise part of an individual's sense of quality may just as readily be another's mediocrity. The term 'quality', therefore must be considered from several prespectives, with no single one providing a comprehensive view point.

On perhaps the most basic level, educational 'quality' refers to the goals of some set of planned experiences. Although the term 'open learning' lacks precision, the stated objectives of such programs seem to cluster into two major areas. Some of programs are postured as 'better ways' to teach traditional subjects, at least for some students.

For example, it is argued that (through open learning internship in 'real life' settings,) one can learn as much about social relations, the organization of work, government and politics, as one can from reading books on the subject. Programs such as these pursue conventional educational objectives with alternative learning strategies. Another category of program goals are those it is argued, that are not at all reflected in the standard curriculun of traditional educational institutions. Such objectives involve those aspects of personal development and self-awareness, which are, at best, an assumed or incidental by-product of completing the sequence of courses in a traditional curriculum. Some learning programs claim to meet both sets of objectives simultaneously--teaching the standard subject matter at least as well as the traditional curriculum, while stimulating growth in other areas through the special nature of the learning experience.

Determining the quality of an educational goal is not something that I can authoritatively address. Depending on personal tastes and values, individuals observing the same set of phenomena can draw quite different conclusions regarding its quality. Indeed, this perspective suggests

that the consumer determines the quality of educational goals through his/her individual choice. Adopting a consumer oriented definition of quality places some obligations on educators however. It requires that goals and methods be explicitly stated and described with sufficient detail and accuracy to allow informed consumer choice. Educators must be analytical about the services they actually deliver rather than simply state their original intent. Requirements for greater depiction of program goals and methods are not as easily accomplished as might initially seem. During the period of rapid growth in the open learning concept, one of its strengths has been its diffuseness. Open learning has appeared to 'be all things to all people'. No doubt, this has been an effective recruiting strategy, but it has also tolerated various poorly managed, underfunded, and weakly conceptualized programs. A further period of consolidation based on some principles of quality will begin at the least, with much greater specificity about program claims.

If program goals are jugded by consumers alone, this has obvious implications for the professional educator. The latter argue that they too have something to contribute

to the determination of appropriate standards of quality. Representing the interests of various academic disciplines the institution that certifies competence, and indirectly, the employer that hires graduates based on competencies implied by degree--holding, educators aren't likely to abandon their traditional prerogatives in favor of consumers. Difficulties in finding the proper balance between the authority of consumers and educators to determine goals is a continuing tension in educational politics.

Another basis on which quality may be more precisely determined, however, program effectiveness. How do the results of the program compare with its stated goals? Does it deliver on what it promises, and are the benefits equal or better than those available elsewhere.

It is, of course, much easier to talk about evaluating program effects than it is to actually do so. Measuring student effects are particularly difficult with programs of the open learning genre, where goals are often vague, students are volunteers, the numbers are typically small, and where valid and reliable measures of non-traditional objectives are hard to find.

Assessing program effectiveness raises a prior issue of whether the program has been adequately implemented. Even carefully evaluated laboratory based programs frequently flounder when efforts are made to duplicate results in 'real world' settings. Evaluation findings are often confounded, when it is impossible to determine if dissappointing results are due to defects in the program models themselves or failure to satisfactorily implement the prorgam.

The third level of quality has as much to do with program image as it does with substance. In order to project a sense of legitimacy, open learning programs must deal with a few damaging misconceptions. Notions that open learning has lower academic standards and demand less effort from students are continuous threats to their credibility. Such programs operate on the periphery of the educational mainstream, their faculties are viewed with suspicion by colleagues in more traditional settings, and degrees where they are offered, may hold less value for graduates in the eyes of employers.

Programs which adopt some of the components of the traditional curriculun will more easily communicate a sense of serious educational purpose than will other programs.

One way in which this may be done is the formulation of objectives. Programs that emphasize the standards subject matter students normally study, but let students learn about them in a variety of ways, are less likely to raise suspicions than programs that denigrate the value of traditional areas of academic knowledge. Although open learning may explicitly add new objectives in affective domains of personal development, such objectives are not, in the eyes of critics, substitutes for academic quality.

Another element essential to the image of quality involves academic credit. Students must receive full academic credit and their institutions must be accredited if such programs are not to seem like extracurricular activities or temporary fads.

Although open learning programs are typically portrayed as an 'alternative', in some circles this evokes the image of a 'fly by night' operation. The desired role is one in which open learning is one of many programs available to students, but which does not aim to replace the classroom. This is a requirement for movement into the mainstream of education institutions.