Unit 8 Evaluation of an Online Course: Mindfulness Practices

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EDU630: Online Teaching & Learning

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June 23, 2023

Introduction

In order to design and deliver effective and meaningful online courses, one must be able to recognize and understand the best practices and guidelines of key course characteristics and how they are used. Understanding how to implement or improve these essential features will help course designers and faculty develop and redesign quality educational experiences that foster successful learning. Therefore, this paper intends to offer a critical review of an online course using a scholarly evaluation tool designed by the Illinois Online Network (ION) at University of Illinois Springfield (2019). To do this, brief discussions will be offered on four learning theories, eight best practices found within the highlighted course, and a short overview of how these findings measure against the ION course evaluation tool.

Evaluation

Selected Online Course

A course titled *Mindfulness Practices* was selected for this evaluation because it is the epitome of a well-designed online learning course that appears to operate seamlessly. It is offered on Linked In Learning's platform and is taught by subject matter expert Henna Inam, whose instructor profile states that she is a coach, author, and C-Level Leader at Fortune 500 companies. Inam has a good speech cadence and body language, and all information that she presents is meaningful and segues well into the next section.

This two-hour course is asynchronous and self-directed and is an excellent example of an aesthetically appealing, experientially engaging, user-intuitive, and well-organized learning course housed on a clean and professional-looking interface. The study is segmented into five sections, including the Introduction and Closing. These include 23 learning videos, 18 experiential "follow along" practice videos, and four quizzes. The technology requirements are not explicitly called out on the course platform, but the basic needs are an Internet browser and

an audio speaker for listening. A certificate of completion is available for printing, and this would require a printer.

Learning Theories

Learning theories are essential to learners because they guide instructors and course designers on how to develop educational experiences that will allow learners to best receive, engage, and process information cognitively so that it becomes new knowledge. In other words, learning theories help those responsible for creating or delivering schooling to critically understand how knowledge is created in learning minds.

Four learning theories were identified in *Mindfulness Practices*.

1. **Andragogy** is the method of teaching adult students. This course could potentially be used in a K-12 setting, but some of the many self-reflection questions throughout are more suitable for adult learners with advanced life experiences.
2. **Self-Directed** learning, also called Learner-Focused, allows students to move at their own pace. The entirety of this course is an on-demand video that can be started and stopped at will, which can benefit online learners because to succeed in online learning content, they "need to take control in planning their learning pace" (Song & Hill, 2007, p. 32). George Siemens (UOC, 2011) believes that when learners are given the freedom and tools to connect as individuals and thinkers, they can better explore, shape, and adapt the information to their own purposes. This can help make learning stick and be more relevant and meaningful for learners.
3. **Applied** learning is an approach that allows learners to take what they learn and use it in real-world settings. This course frequently asks students to consider, recall, or imagine many reflective questions and situations. In this way, students are using an applied thinking approach.

4. **Discovery-Based** learning allows students to gain knowledge through hands-on exploration and self-inquiry. This course strongly emphasizes metacognitive self-examination. Self-reflection is essential to education because it assists in identifying one's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement.

Lastly, while Siemens' theory on Connectivism argues that learning cannot be maximized if it involves one sender delivering static information to a learner population, it also posits that "learning that happens outside of an individual, such as through social media, online networks, blogs, or information databases" (WGU, 2021, para. 4) is valuable. Therefore, one might consider if the large amounts of globally accessed data and contemporary technology he refers to couldn't be leveraged by individual learners across massive open online courses (MOOC) such as Linked In Learning. Perhaps Siemens' 2004 "learning theory for the digital age" (Corbett & Spinello, 2020) statement didn't consider that well-designed courses with strategically inserted "self" questions could be an alternative to providing new perspectives and different viewpoints igniting from oneself versus from a group of others.

Best Practices

Many best practices have been – and continue to be – discovered about designing, creating, and administering online education. Many of the best practices found within *Mindfulness Practices* are listed within the Illinois Online Network guidelines (2019). Below is a list of eight ingredients for creating successful online learning in the *Mindfulness Practices* course, although there may be more.

1. **Trust:** When beginning a new course, instructors need to establish trust with their students. The teacher of *Mindfulness Practices* creates immediate upfront trust with her learners by opening with a personal story that becomes her "why" for creating the course

and continuing with story shares relevant to learning topics as she moves through the course.

2. **Objectives:** Students need to see goals and objectives to know what to expect from their performance. Learning Objectives remain visible throughout the course on the Overview tab under the video player.
3. **Microlearning**. The learning content structure is critical, and this course is designed using microlearning video segments ranging from one to five minutes. "Bite-able chunks" of information tend to keep learners' interest and allow them to feel a sense of accomplishment more often.
4. **Personal Experience**. Enough cannot be said about the benefits of students connecting their prior knowledge and life experiences to new information to create new meaning and understanding. The instructor of this course offers many generous self-reflective questions that will never leave learners wondering, "What's in it for me?"
5. **Engaging Multimedia**. Video-based learning adds life to online education by making it effective and engaging (Crowd Wisdom, 2021). Whereas straight text presents information, new digital media can help one to understand that information. For example, digital media leading to interactive learning can impact cognitive development and "influence thinking, understanding, and knowing during a child's life" (Herro, 2014, p.261). According to DePietro (2012, p. 1), digital connectivity is "beneficial to curriculum development in higher education" as "technology can transform the process of education."
6. **Formative Assessments**. Four quizzes are provided throughout the course to inform and motivate students about their progress.

7. **Experiential Exercises**. Like when John Dewey discussed "learning by doing," experiential learning involves the whole person; "learning takes place on the affective and behavioral dimensions as well as on the cognitive dimension" (Gentry, 1990, p. 20). This course has 18 meditative practice videos for students to practice their knowledge as the instructor demonstrates onscreen.
8. **ADA and Technical Support.** Linked In Learning's environment is ADA-friendly, with features such as closed caption titles, text transcripts for every video, multiple playback speeds, and allowing learners to control the audio and video using keyboard shortcuts. Additionally, a GET HELP link is under the Q&A tab, which is always visible throughout the course. There is also the option to use the Q&A forum to seek help from other learners.

Evaluation Tool

Illinois Online Network's evaluation tool for online courses (2019) consists of seven best practice categories. While at least one characteristic from each category was found in *Mindfulness Practices,* not all applied to the course. For example, the self-directed learning video did not have collaborating students, a discussion board, or a grading rubric, so these elements could not be reviewed. An analysis of each category and its characteristics would be too in-depth for this review. However, this learning course met every guideline for its unique video-on-demand learning environment. Likewise, nothing on the categorical checklist would have applied and was remiss. Overall, the course is straightforward to navigate. While this can be attributed more to Linked In Learning's platform, the course itself is designed logically well. The content sequence makes good sense and appears pleasing and organized. Objectives and content calibrate with each other. Instructional materials and technologies are stellar. While there is a

closed caption feature, the onscreen text is also automatically built into the design. There is a good use of quizzes throughout, as they occur after the introduction and the end of each learning module. Quiz grades automatically appear after submission.

Because this is an asynchronous, web-based, self-learning course, learning activities are designed for "student-content" interaction. In other words, there are no collaboration features aside from a Q&A user forum that resembles an LMS discussion board and is built into the course on the Q&A tab, which is always visible on the page during video play. With a solid Internet connection in place, there are no issues with buffering, and hyperlinks are easily identified.

Only two downsides were found throughout this analysis. One is that Linked In Learning incorporates a pop-up box 20 minutes into the training to ask for a review of their site, which felt distracting. The other is that the supplemental “Exercise Files” is offered in ZIP format, which can make learners who do not have the required software on their computer to unzip the files feel excluded. This can be improved by offering PDF files instead.

Conclusion

Mindfulness Practices is an extremely easy online video course to navigate with an appealing user interface. It employs at least eight best practices and four learning theories and is robust with experiential and reflective exercises. While it is not a face-to-face course, the instructor does a suitable job of encouraging ("Practice when you can"), inspiring ("Think of a project you were really proud of"), and educating about the cognitive and emotional science behind mindfulness. Personal storytelling relative to the learning topics elevates the learning and is a highlight of this training. Students are not only invited to join in on the demonstrations; their participation is expected.

Cathorall et al. (2018) state there is no significant difference in the final grades of traditional and online students, and they need flexibility to achieve higher education (Irvine, et al. 2013). Therefore, leveraging high-quality learning videos alongside best practices and proven learning theories as web-streaming/in-class options can produce a community-classroom setting while meeting students' needs. This analysis demonstrates how educational value can be created using Web 2.0 tools and a well-designed learning video such as this one. Web 2.0 tools offer unique and dynamic ways for students to connect with information (DePietro, 2012) and "engaging means for blending in-class with out-of-class interactions" (Medic, 2022, p. 1549, para. 7). Aligned with this, course designers and instructors need to plan for tasks that allow students to use their knowledge and experience (Cercone, 2008), and this can be done by including self-awareness and reflective questions for the learners to ponder and construct their own meaning and valuable knowledge. Content should be created in ways students find essential to their context and interest (UOC, 2011).

Furthermore, as the use of self-directed video learning and MOOCs become more prevalent, one might even consider these course formats as part of an interim solution for existing concerns, such as the reluctance of online faculty to train in pedagogy for online instruction because of ill-perceived notions that online learning is of an unsettled nature (Crawford-Ferre & West, 2012). In this instance, a well-constructed learning video that incorporates many elements found in the *Mindfulness Practices* video course can be administered to an online class with less teacher support needed than when delivering multiple units of instruction, assignments, and resources. Another example is to use learning videos as these in a "multi-access framework" where learning courses occur simultaneously in person (physically on campus) or online (real-time using video technology) so that students have the autonomy to participate in person, online, or a combination of the two.

The best learning environment is one that creates opportunities for learners' engagement (Astin, 1984, as cited in Medic, 2022, p. 1549)—and Web 2.0 applications robustly present these experiences. In other words, with well-designed learning videos such as this one, students can now *interact* with online content instead of just *viewing* it.

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