

# Creating a Sustainable Online Instructor Observation System: A Case Study Highlighting Flaws when Blending Mentoring and Evaluation

Marthann Schulte, Kay Dennis, Michael Eskey, Cathy Taylor et Heather Zeng

Volume 13, numéro 3, juin 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1067226ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i3.1135>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Schulte, M., Dennis, K., Eskey, M., Taylor, C. & Zeng, H. (2012). Creating a Sustainable Online Instructor Observation System: A Case Study Highlighting Flaws when Blending Mentoring and Evaluation. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(3), 83–96.  
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i3.1135>

Résumé de l'article

Quality and accountability mandates require institutions to monitor online instruction in a uniform and complete manner. In many institutions, instructor training is sparse and faculty evaluation occurs only through end-of-course student evaluations that may or may not yield adequate information on how the instructor performs online. Consequently, the online instructor evaluation system (OIES) was developed to ensure the finest quality educational experience for online students via a systematic approach to faculty training, mentoring, and evaluation. Research has shown that combining mentoring and evaluation is not feasible, and therefore another approach is warranted.

Copyright (c) Marthann Schulte, Kay Dennis, Michael Eskey, Cathy Taylor et Heather Zeng, 2012



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

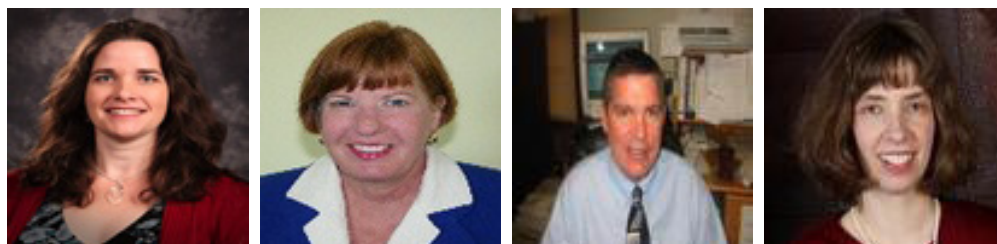
**érudit**

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

## Creating a Sustainable Online Instructor Observation System: A Case Study Highlighting Flaws when Blending Mentoring and Evaluation



Marthann Schulte, Kay Dennis, Michael Eskey, Cathy Taylor, and Heather Zeng  
Park University, United States

### Abstract

Quality and accountability mandates require institutions to monitor online instruction in a uniform and complete manner. In many institutions, instructor training is sparse and faculty evaluation occurs only through end-of-course student evaluations that may or may not yield adequate information on how the instructor performs online. Consequently, the *online instructor evaluation system* (OIES) was developed to ensure the finest quality educational experience for online students via a systematic approach to faculty training, mentoring, and evaluation. Research has shown that combining mentoring and evaluation is not feasible, and therefore another approach is warranted.

**Keywords:** Distance education; online learning; faculty; instructor; training; mentoring; observation; evaluation; online

### Introduction

Over the past decade, most colleges and universities in the United States have experienced a dramatic increase in the growth and popularity of online degree programs. According to research conducted by the Sloan Consortium, distance learning is growing rapidly, with 83% of higher education institutions offering some form of distance learning (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Similarly, community colleges report an 11.3% increase in distance education enrollments, a figure substantially ahead of overall national campus enrollments, which averaged less than 2% (Lokken, 2009). Further, in 2008 an overall 12.9% growth in online learning in higher education occurred, exceeding a 1.6% growth in traditional classes during the same period (p. 5). Online courses clearly are entrenched in modern higher education when measured by the volume of courses, number of faculty and students involved, infrastructure investment dollars, or other parameters.

Students cite convenience and flexibility as dominant reasons to enroll in online courses (Northrup, 2009). Faculty also benefit from online course flexibility and convenience as it provides more professional options such as teaching part-time at one or more institutions, an option to supplement academic retirement, and professional development opportunities. Institutions benefit from enhanced access and revenue from students who reside a great distance from the institution's geographic location. Employers appreciate the availability of workers with additional qualifications, attained with less absenteeism or career interruption.

As institutions of higher learning strengthen their infrastructures to accommodate the demand for online courses and programs, urgent needs for trained and properly motivated faculty emerge. Through proactive measures to train, mentor, evaluate, and remediate online faculty, colleges and universities can limit potential student problems and complaints. It is not sufficient merely to train instructors without conducting follow-up administrative or peer scrutiny of their performance. Quality and accountability mandates obligate institutions to monitor online instruction in a uniform and complete manner. Institutional circumstances require that such monitoring be conducted efficiently.

Park University, with a historic campus located in Parkville, Missouri (near Kansas City) and 40 campus centers in 21 states, has developed and implemented a quality management system to ensure that students are taught by trained, mentored, and evaluated faculty. Park has experienced a surge in distance education enrollments, with a student enrollment full-time equivalent (FTE) of 20,000 and over 50,000 total enrollments annually. The university employs approximately 350 online instructors to teach more than 450 course sections each eight-week term in order to accommodate student demand. Because Park is committed to high standards, academic integrity, course content consistency, and effective measures of learning outcomes, the transition to the online course delivery mode has necessitated new approaches to monitoring and evaluating academic quality.

In many institutions, instructor training is sparse and faculty evaluation occurs only through end-of-course student evaluations that may or may not yield adequate information on how the instructor performs online. However, Park promotes academic rigor by funneling substantial resources into faculty training and evaluation. Consequently, the *online instructor evaluation system* (OIES) was developed to ensure the finest quality educational experience for online students via a systematic approach to faculty training, mentoring, and evaluation (Mandernach, Donnelly, Dailey, & Schulte, 2005). Using a case study approach, the OIES was created based upon institutional need, existing research on online learning, and resources available for instructor mentoring and evaluation.

## Literature Review

### Background

Institutions with online learning courses and programs are understandably interested in best practices and empirical information that can strengthen their distance learning operations. Consequently, evaluation of online courses is a popular topic in the research literature (Dykman & David, 2008; Lord, 2009; Mandernach et.al., 2005; Weschke & Canipe, 2010; Villar Angulo & Alegre de la Rosa, 2007; Avery, Bryant, Mathios, Kang, & Bell, 2006). Distance learning practitioners have struggled to create effective models for designing, assessing, and evaluating online courses. Observation of the Web sites of online and/or higher education associations reveals various references to guidelines and best practices that encourage excellence in online learning. Individual authors also add to the depth and breadth of online learning interest. The oft-cited seven principles (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) and subsequent application of the principles to online course evaluation (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001) are but two examples. Such seminal works, with their learning-focused criteria, provide the theoretical background of adult learning theory that guides this research. Additionally, these adult learning principles have guided the development of many online programs.

The system described herein incorporates an array of best practices for teaching online, notably the seven principles (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Graham et.al., 2001). Through our initial review of the literature, coupled with an analysis of key components of the Park course platform and course layout, an evaluation process was established using a case study approach. As the OIES is a dynamic system, this section presents some of the research that influenced this process. By implementing various versions of the document over a period of time and analyzing the outcomes, improvements were made to the evaluation tool and the overall process. While thematically the coverage areas remain the same, the evaluation tool process has been refined to clarify what the institution expects from instructors. The following sections provide an overview of focal areas that emerged from the OIES and which contributed to the present streamlined model used at the university.

### Community in the Classroom

As noted above, the seven principles (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Graham et al., 2001) provided the basis for the criteria established for the review. The importance of establishing *community in the classroom* has been confirmed by a number of writings. Dykman and Davis (2008) affirm the use of a personal profile as the first real opportunity to set the tone for the course with students. Moreover, it is an important early opportunity to connect with the students and therefore warrants careful consideration and preparation. The authors conclude that “Consistent interaction, steady participation, and timely reinforcement are the keys to keeping the students in an online course involved and active” (p. 287). Malbrito (2001) aligns with the preceding authors in recognizing the importance of student introductions in the course. Inducing students to post meaningful profiles is well worth the effort for the overall success of the virtual classroom experience. The OIES emphasizes the

importance of encouraging all students to post an introduction and suggests that instructors should reach out to students who may be late in posting their introductions. The OIES also reminds instructors to acknowledge the presence of students in the online classroom and to comment in an authentic way on the student's sharing of personal information.

## Discussion Facilitation in Online Instruction

Another area of the OIES that emerged from the literature is effective *discussion facilitation in online instruction*. The OIES examines both policy compliance and level of engagement by the online instructor. Instructors are required to participate a specific number of days each week and to engage in critical thinking dialogue with students to promote quality postings. In support of this emphasis area, Dietz-Uhler, Fisher, and Han (2007) reviewed a study of retention rates in online education. Some students reported that their reasons for dropping out of a course included a lack of instructor participation, feedback, and replies to student e-mails. Barnard, Paton, and Lan (2008) suggest that instructors of online courses should be especially concerned with creating learning environments where positive perceptions toward online course communication and collaboration can be informed and fostered. This latter qualitative study revealed that while positive instructor feedback and interest in their work elicited pleasure and pride in students, failure by the instructor to acknowledge their potential produced shame. These findings bear clear andragogic implications for online teaching. Ultimately the instructor must be willing to re-evaluate and to revise teacher-learner roles and relationships. Thus, through analyzing the relevant literature the evaluation team realized that discussion facilitation distinctly differentiates the online course from an independent study. Therefore, acknowledgement by instructor and peers is central to the learning success of each student and poses a unique opportunity for instructors.

Mann (2005) describes discussion as an essential dimension of the online course. The discussion feature should resemble a conversation that allows each participant a voice in the learning group and its workings. Responsibility is reciprocal. Mann suggests that instructor withdrawal from the discussion will lead to stagnation. To avoid this, instructors must be fully cognizant of their privilege and power and use them judiciously to engage learners with their classmates and the content. This vital classroom communication dynamic is reflected in the tone, engagement, and guidance provided in the online instructor observation. It seeks to eliminate stagnation in favor of ongoing instructor presence and to prompt feedback to students throughout the course. These critical points are precisely captured in the OIES.

## Assessment, Grading, and Feedback

Other areas of emphasis in the OIES include a focus on the instructor's approach to course *assessments, grading, and feedback*. Dykman and Davis (2008) address this issue in their dialogue on efficacy in the online classroom. These authors confirm that students are always very concerned about grades and that too much ambiguity about grading in an online course can destroy the instructor's credibility with the students. The authors posit that without the normal contact found in a conventional classroom, students seldom know what to expect from an instructor. Ambiguity or inconsistency in grading quickly destroys trust.

The OIES provides a rigorous analysis of the instructor's progress in grading, use of rubrics, and providing individualized feedback to students on their performance.

Some key findings that relate to the development of the OIES involve a 2010 survey of more than 550 higher education faculty and students in the United States and Canada. More than a third of the faculty in the sample said they were not proficient with their institution's course management system. Students reported being either "pretty much lost" or that they "know a little, a few basics" (Primary Research Group, 2010). These findings support claims that it is essential for instructors to be supported in using the tools in order to provide feedback and grading and also that students must be provided guidance that help them learn and to assimilate into the online culture. Through the self-assessment feature of the OIES, reflection and metacognition enable our instructors to consider how effective they are at providing feedback and assigning grades. Through this process instructors build their capacity for integrating best practices in their work.

## Course Climate and Learning Environment

A final best practice to be discussed here is one of the most critical focal areas of the OIES, *course climate and learning environment*. Over the years of implementing the OIES, our team has strived to assure that the learning climate in our online courses is conducive to the academic success of a diverse group of adult learners. Our experience with observing courses over the past several years affirms the research of Gilmore and Warren (2007). The findings of their qualitative study of online seminars confirm that when an instructor is absent or provides limited interaction in the online classroom, students feel isolated in their learning. Students are then forced to navigate the curriculum alone or to bond with classmates, who are not content experts. The OIES evaluators have recognized that ample clarification, addressing students by name, and timely follow-up to questions and concerns are beneficial in establishing student/instructor respect and trust in the classroom. Dykman and Davis (2008) attest similarly that consistent interaction, steady participation, and timely reinforcement are the keys to keeping online students involved and active. The OIES process affirms that quality online teaching requires extensive interaction and a substantial commitment of the instructor's time and effort.

This section highlighted some of the supportive literature and lessons learned as related to the OIES development. It should be emphasized that this OIES process was integrated in tandem with an academic institutional examination to assure a seamless investment in instructor efficacy and engagement in the online classroom. Aspects of traditional and online evaluation processes in the field of faculty development were used to provide additional insights into the model, strategy, and implementation that would work well at the university and at the same time also provide a unique learning context. The OIES offers a rigorous evaluation system for instructors who may require extensive support in transitioning to the online instructional environment.



## Effective Methods of Performance Management (Faculty Development)

Lord (2009) suggests that professors should develop delicate ways to identify weaknesses and praise strengths. Weschke and Canipe (2010) describe an evaluation model similar to the OIES which is conducted peer-to-peer and is not derived from administrative leadership. This similar model identifies collaborations among instructors that lead to constructive faculty development. After several years of implementation, the results of many observations suggest that our emphasis on carefully worded, concrete checklists has yielded less ambiguity and confusion about the performance level expected of online instructors.

The strength of the OIES lies in its futuristic element of embedding opportunities for self-guided reflection and learning by the instructor being evaluated. According to Ciezki and Kharé (2010), these types of self-directed reflections and participative reviews benefit both employers and employees as they build a sense of ownership and motivation through communication and negotiation. In many ways, self-directed learning allows employees to assume responsibility and a certain level of personal investment. This unique combination of reflection, dialogue, review of professional development topics, and final summary in the OIES provides a robust quality assurance process. It also provides a tier of support in working with a faculty evaluator, thus humanizing the evaluation process and helping to align the instructor's self-assessment with the actual criteria established on the OIES. Furthermore, it provides an objective observation with rationale for best practices.

A range of sensitive topics are addressed in the faculty evaluation. The OIES model balances objectivity with a tightly written checklist and rubric that eliminate subjectivity. It has also fostered a broad-brush professional development approach for acquiring skills at teaching online.

### Case Study: An Overview of the OIES Method

First implemented in 2004, the online instructor evaluation system aided the Park University Distance Learning division in the areas of online instructor mentoring, evaluation, course scheduling priority, and professional development. A total of 437 separate OIES evaluations have been conducted on online instructors up to the present day. The number of evaluators has fluctuated from term to term depending upon evaluator availability and course numbers needed. For example, one evaluator might have conducted evaluations in one eight-week accelerated term, followed by a term in which five or six evaluators performed OIES evaluations. Over the years of use, 12 OIES evaluators have been trained and utilized. The current cadre of six evaluators includes members who have followed the process from its inception to the present. The materials that follow in this case study are based on the cumulative experiences of this author and evaluator workgroup.

The robust and comprehensive nature of the OIES is one of its strengths. The OISE includes both formative and summative evaluation components. The formative reviews, a total of five, are completed by the instructor evaluators at the beginning of the term and continue

every two weeks during the eight-week term. Each review focuses on specific online best practices and/or Park University online learning policy. The reviews provide boxes for each criterion, the evaluator rating of the level to which the instructor has met the criterion, and comments. The comment box provides the most useful formative/mentoring feedback for online instructors. Evaluators have compiled banks of commonly used comments to facilitate the completion of each review, but often it is necessary to customize the comments for the needs and idiosyncrasies of each instructor.

The intended result of each formative review is to spark a mentoring dialogue between instructor and evaluator. Each formative review is posted to a secure online portal. An automated email notifies the instructor that the review is available. Frequently, questions, suggestions, and guidance on best online teaching practices dominate the subsequent mentoring discussions. The OIES team has found that reactions to the formative reviews are as unique as the instructors. Some instructors become very involved in the “back and forth” discussions (via phone, email, or both) of the reviews and possible modifications of their teaching practices. Other instructors mistakenly view the formative reviews as “judgments” on their teaching. Dispelling these misperceptions quickly and efficiently is important so that mentoring discussions can prevail.

In an effort to maximize the benefits of mentoring, the OIES includes an instructor self-review component during the formative stages. Self-reviews, which are completed every two weeks, mirror the corresponding weeks’ formative reviews. Criteria for the self-reviews and formative reviews are complementary so that both instructor and evaluator focus on the same items at once. While the self-reviews are not mandatory, they are strongly encouraged for reasons of professional development, rich instructor input, and acknowledgement of areas of strength or weakness. The self-reviews are not viewed by the evaluator during the term, although the instructor can choose to share the self-reviews with the evaluator if deemed appropriate to enhance understanding or meet mentoring needs. The self-reviews are compiled via a secure online portal and shared with the academic department at the end of the term.

The summative component of the OIES includes a summative review and end-of-term student evaluations of the course and instructor. The summative review is completed by the same evaluator who conducted the formative/mentoring process during the term. The summative review is designed to encapsulate the formative review process and to stress changes (either positive or negative) in the instructor’s facilitation of the course during the formative/mentoring phase. Ultimately, the evaluator makes a recommendation of whether the instructor should be a) *retained*, b) *retained with contingencies*, or c) *not retained* as an online instructor at the university. A fourth level, *probation*, was used briefly, but this category was difficult to distinguish from retain with contingencies. For this reason the two ratings were merged. As remediation and retraining are desirable for most online instructors having difficulty, the merged category used the label retain with contingencies to connote a more mentoring, developmental stance by the university. While the overall rating levels provide categorization and overall feedback, instructors and evaluators suggest that it is the comments (in both formative and summative reviews) that provide the most helpful



guidance to online instructors.

The summative components of the OIES and instructor self-reviews are delivered to the instructor's academic department online program coordinator. Based upon the summative review, instructor self-reviews, and student evaluations, the program coordinator determines which individual courses the instructor may be assigned to teach in the future or if the instructor no longer will be given departmental teaching assignments. Online administrators also use the summative components of the OIES to determine if the instructor is adept at handling online instruction and the particular policies of online learning. In this way, both the academic and administrative areas utilize the OIES when making instructor retention decisions.

## Outcomes of the OIES

Of the 437 OIES evaluations conducted to date, 379 (86%) bore the final rating of retain. Thirty-eight reviews were rated retain with contingencies, nine were probation (a term which is not currently used), and 11 were in the category of do not retain. These statistics support the overall intent of the OIES as a mentoring mechanism to retain and retrain online instructors. Because so few instructors received negative ratings, we concluded that the OIES either reinforced existing positive online facilitation or that instructors who may have been struggling in their online facilitation were properly guided and mentored via the formative reviews so as to result in acceptable improvement by the end of the process. One cannot assume that the OIES itself leads to good online facilitation, but the data and outcomes of the OIES do enhance instructor awareness of and adherence to policy and best practices in online learning.

After implementing the OIES, the team found numerous strengths and some weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses fell into two main categories: administration-oriented and instructor-oriented. Administrative issues included a) the time involved in completing each formative review, b) standardizing the nomenclature and comments that passed between the instructor evaluators, and c) managing the list of current and future reviewees for the OIES. Instructor-oriented issues included a) explaining and allowing for differences in the instructional strategies used across courses (that is, the instructor presentation of developed course content) and b) the notable differences between new instructors and experienced instructors regarding their perceptions of the OIES.

## Time

Early in the implementation of the OIES, the instructor evaluators discovered that the formative reviews (which were completed and delivered to instructors every two weeks) were very time-consuming. Each criterion on the reviews required the instructor evaluator to access the online course via the learning management system and to scrutinize multiple areas in which the instructor facilitated student learning. This process became even more time-consuming as the instructor evaluators often had to compare instructor facilitation of course content to the master course developed content. If they found instructor deviations from the master course content (which could be either beneficial or detrimental depending upon the deviation), the evaluator had to spend additional time consulting with adminis-

trators or the academic department concerning the content changes. It was not uncommon for a normal formative review to take 30–50 minutes to complete. One strategy to address this time factor was for each evaluator to evaluate a group of instructors teaching different sections of the same course. This strategy allowed the instructor evaluator to become very familiar with the developed content and to then discern efficiently the differences each instructor used in the facilitation of their course section. Consequently, evaluating several sections of the same course reduced the time required to approximately 20–35 minutes per review.

## Standard Language

Another administrative issue involved standardizing the language used by the instructor evaluators. This element was a natural extension of the criterion-based nature of the formative reviews. The instructor evaluators had to ensure that their interpretation of the criteria was consistent not only among themselves, but also with the policies of the online operations unit and academic departments. Each instructor evaluator spent much time in telephonic and email communication with the other instructor evaluators to ensure that a uniform message would be conveyed to online instructors. Building on this desire for uniformity of interpretation, the OIES team developed comment banks for each review. The comment banks were shared with each instructor evaluator and helped ensure that each online instructor received the same information about Park policies and online instructor facilitation expectations. Instructor evaluators did have the latitude to customize their comments for each review and for each instructor, but the comment banks increased continuity and equity in the formative reviews. The comment banks were also time-efficient as the same comment, if warranted, could be quickly cut and pasted into several formative reviews. Another strategy for achieving standard language among the evaluators would be interrater reliability research. Interrater reliability has not yet been assessed for the OIES, but it would be an appropriate way to gauge standardization and equitable treatment in reviews.

## Management

A final administrative consideration was managing a list of current and future OIES reviewees. To meet this need, a spreadsheet was created and archived by the lead instructor evaluator. The spreadsheet included all the pertinent administrative information as well as OIES term, evaluator, and summative evaluation information. In addition, this archival system provided a plan for future OIES terms by anticipating instructor teaching assignments and evaluator availability. The lead instructor evaluator kept track of online instructors who received retain with contingencies summative evaluation ratings and planned for these instructors to be evaluated again during the next term. A system of OIES referral was also created in which operations staff and department program coordinators could suggest instructors for OIES evaluation. Referrals could be made on the grounds of administrative infractions (failure to follow university policies) or facilitation concerns (improper interaction with students in their online classroom). While it was a sufficient administrative tool, the master spreadsheet and working versions became unwieldy and prone to input error. Attempts were made to create a database and online portal entry for administrative needs,

but these needs were not met due to a lack of computer programming personnel and/or funding resources.

## Course/Instructor Differences

Instructor-oriented issues with the OIES were more revealing, arguably, than the administrative issues. A perennial online instructor issue related to the difference between an instructor and a course developer. According to university policy, course developers create the course content, following university and operations guidelines; and this content is subject to approval by the academic department. The developed material is then provided to the various online instructors for individual course sections. Instructors are encouraged to add supplemental course content to provide for their own instructional differences and preferences. This policy was confusing to online instructors; therefore, the OIES served as a reinforcement of this guideline. Some instructors felt their creativity was stifled by the policy, but the mentoring exchanges with the instructor evaluators provided suggestions for taking the developed course content and enhancing the material with their own facilitation methods. Through the formative reviews and mentoring early in the term, instructors received guidance and tips from the evaluator to enhance the later weeks of the term. Evaluators were able to explain university policy and expectations in a real course context. In some instances, evaluators served as a peer bridge between content developers and individual section instructors. The presence of an intermediary was also beneficial when misinterpretations occurred between administrative needs and instructor intentions.

## New versus Experienced Instructors

One striking difference was the perception of the OIES among new instructors compared to existing instructors. The OIES was envisioned primarily as an efficient mentoring tool to aid new online instructors on the grounds that new instructors, unfamiliar to university policies and/or online instruction, would be the greatest beneficiaries of the OIES formative reviews. It was also believed that these new instructors would be suspect of the OIES as a “judgment” of their online facilitation ability. In actuality, the instructor evaluators observed that new instructors were among the most receptive to the formative, mentoring reviews. They appreciated the guidance and even the way in which the formative reviews provided them with a measure of their online facilitation performance during the term. The early formative reviews were timed so that corrections could be made within the active term in order to benefit current students. One new instructor commented, “I love the constructive criticism and since this is my first time teaching online courses, it is greatly appreciated.” Another instructor echoed, “This being my first course online has been a great experience, learning as I go as well as generating ideas for me on how to make changes in the course materials, supplements, etc.”

Experienced Park online instructors were equally appreciative of the OIES, but the instructor evaluators witnessed an initial suspicion from these instructors. These suspicions ranged from questions about a) why they were being evaluated, b) how the information would be reported to their department, and c) the credentials of the instructor evaluators. The instructor evaluators found that it was best to quell these concerns by underscoring the

fact that the OIES was primarily a formative, mentoring evaluation system. The reviews were designed to guide and suggest, not judge and dictate. As these existing instructors became familiar with the review process and the mentoring discussions with the instructor evaluator, they too became appreciative of the OIES and looked to the instructor evaluators for new ideas to enhance their teaching. The following is a good example of this mentality of sharing, fostered by the OIES. “Are there examples to share from other instructors as to how they might be embellishing the rubric, grading system if that’s what you want us to do?” A common culminating comment to an instructor evaluator from an experienced instructor was, “Thanks for your excellent suggestions and mentoring. They were very beneficial.” This was the predominant sentiment from existing and new instructors after experiencing the OIES.

## Conclusions

Evaluation is a human process. As such, the OIES promotes the evaluator’s ability to work effectively to positively guide an instructor during the course. Cognizant of issues that can arise (i.e., instructor illness, course room development issues, technological challenges, natural disasters, or other life issues) the evaluator also must provide some room for flexibility. The instructor stands central in this evaluation process and is assessed distinctly with a final observation rating or outcome level. Regardless of the outcome of the OIES evaluation in terms of the instructor’s rating, the continual conversation centers on establishing the ideal environmental conditions online for students to forge learning and critical thinking. Through integrated support, a learning community online, and ongoing professional development resources with examples that identify best practices, the instructor finds collegial support.

Overall, the instructor evaluation team was encouraged by the instructor reactions to the OIES. The team realized that clarification and emphasis on the formative/mentoring nature of the reviews was extremely important. It was equally important to spend as much time as necessary in the mentoring dialogues between the instructor and instructor evaluator. The reviews proved to be an excellent guide for these mentoring exchanges, which occur within a context of guidance and mutual benefit. However, at times the evaluators experienced frustration when their mentoring advice was ignored.

The evaluation component became problematic for in the final analysis, at close of term, the instructors’ skills, progress, and potential must be categorized in a final recommendation in order to meet administrative needs of the institution. Evaluators experienced conflict of interest when shifting from a mentoring role to that of evaluator. Rendering these determinations often severed the mentoring relationship permanently. The team concluded that mixing mentoring with a high-stakes judgment is illogical. Therefore, future evaluative mechanisms at Park University separated the mentoring and evaluation functions.

Another charge from the university pertained to an annual teaching evaluation. The thorough, nurturing nature of the OIES reviews placed severe constraints on the number of online instructors who could be evaluated annually by the limited pool of available evaluators.

There were simply too many instructors and too few evaluators. Fulfilling the annual evaluation requirement for all online adjunct instructors was unsustainable given the mentoring nature of the reviews. Knowing that no more evaluators were available, a streamlined evaluation model was sought.

A shorter instrument was devised that focused only on evaluation. The *faculty online observation* (FOO) reflected the lessons learned from implementing the OIES. The FOO consists of fewer evaluation criteria, observes an instructor during a short, finite span of time, and yet retains the necessary online evaluation components stressed in the research literature and found to be paramount in the OIES experience. The FOO continues to emphasize the same critical areas, thereby ensuring that student learning needs are still met via proper online instructor facilitation. The FOO uses the same retrievable archive as the OIES for university administrative use and instructor feedback.

Every aspect of online education at Park University occurs collaboratively. From situating a course within a curriculum, through syllabus formation, course design, development, delivery, approvals, to faculty training, we anticipate and solve problems relative to quality. Every online instructor is welcomed to Park with the understanding that providing the best educational experience available is our top priority. The next logical step is to ensure that the instructor possesses the proper skills, mindset, and expertise to facilitate student learning. The OIES provided valuable insight into the hazards of blending mentoring and evaluations. The FOO brings to fruition these high standards and the demands of modern distance education.

## References

- Allen, E. I., & Seaman, J. (2008, November). *Staying the course: Online education in the United States*. The Sloan Consortium. Retrieved from [http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying\\_the\\_course.pdf](http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/staying_the_course.pdf)
- Avery, R., Bryant, W., Mathios, A., Kang, H., & Bell, D. (2006). Electronic course evaluations: Does online delivery system influence student evaluations? *Journal of Economic Education*, 37(1), 21–37.
- Barnard, L., Paton, V., Lan, W. (2008). Online self-regulatory learning behaviors as a mediator in the relationship between online course perceptions with achievement. *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 9(2), 1–11.
- Chickering, A., & Ehrmann, S. (1996). Implementing the seven principles: Technology as lever. *AHHE Bulletin*, October 3–6. Retrieved from <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html>.
- Ciecki, C., & Kharé, N. (2010). Personal learning plans: A tool for engaging and retaining talent. *National Career Development Association's Career Convergence Newsletter*. Retrieved from [http://associationdatabase.com/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news\\_article/28851/\\_PARENT/layout\\_details\\_cc/false](http://associationdatabase.com/aws/NCDA/pt/sd/news_article/28851/_PARENT/layout_details_cc/false)
- Dietz-Uhler, B., Fisher, A., & Han, A. (2007). Designing online courses to promote student retention. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 36(1), 105–112.
- Dykman, C., & Davis, C. (2008) Online education forum – Part three: A quality online educational experience. *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 19(3), 281–289.
- Gilmore, S., & Warren, S. (2007). Emotion online: Experiences of teaching in a virtual learning environment. *Human Relations*, 60(4), 581–608.
- Graham, C., Cagiltay, K., Lim, B., Craner, J., & Duffy, T. M. (2001, March/April). Seven principles of effective teaching: A practical lens for evaluating online courses. [http://technologysource.org/article/seven\\_principles\\_of\\_effective\\_teaching/](http://technologysource.org/article/seven_principles_of_effective_teaching/)
- Lokken, F. (2009). *2008 distance education survey results: Tracking the impact of e-learning at community colleges*. Washington, DC: Instructional Technical Council. Retrieved from <http://www.itcnetwork.org/file.php?file=%2F1%2FITCAnnualSurveyMarch2009Final.pdf>
- Lord, T. (2009). “But I thought we were colleagues?” Professors evaluating professors. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 38(3), 62–66.
- Malbrito, M. (2001), Facilitating interactivity in an online business writing course. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 64(3), 81–86.



- Mandernach, B. J., Donnelly, E., Dailey, A., & Schulte, M. (2005). A faculty evaluation model for online instructors: Mentoring and evaluation in the online classroom. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 8(3). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall83/mandernach83.htm>
- Mann, S. (2005). Alienation in the learning environment: A failure of community. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(1), 43–55.
- Northrup, P. (2009). Online learners' preferences for interaction. In A. Orellana, T. Hudgins, & M. Simonson (Eds.), *The perfect online course: Best practices for designing and teaching* (pp. 463–473). Information Age Publishing.
- Primary Research Group. (2010). *The survey of higher education faculty: Use of educational technology*. New York, NY: Primary Research Group.
- Villar Angulo, L., & Alegre de la Rosa, O. (2007). Online faculty development and assessment systems (OFDAS): A study of academic learning. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 20, 21–41.
- Weschke, B., & Canipe, S. (2010). The faculty evaluation process: The first step in fostering professional development in an online university. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 7(1), 45–55.

Athabasca University 

