
Associated conference: “Yes we can!” - Digital Education for Better Futures (EDEN 2023 Annual Conference)

Conference location: Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin, Ireland

Conference date: 18-20 June 2023

How to cite: Gunder, A., & Gay, K. Centering Equity and Quality in Online, Blended, and Digital Learning 2023 *Ubiquity Proceedings*, 3(1): 345-350. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/uproc.107>

Published on: 27 October 2023

Copyright: © 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

UBIQUITY PROCEEDINGS



<https://ubiquityproceedings.com>

CENTERING EQUITY AND QUALITY IN ONLINE, BLENDED, AND DIGITAL LEARNING

Angela Gunder, Online Learning Consortium, United States

Kristen Gay, Online Learning Consortium, United States

Correspondence: *Angela Gunder: angela.gunder@onlinelearning-c.org*

Abstract

This case study evaluates the Online Learning Consortium's (OLC's) five pillars of Quality Online Education – learning effectiveness, scale, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction – against equity criteria. The authors argue that the pillars could more effectively mobilize equity and quality for a range of stakeholders in the field of online, blended, and digital learning. The study addresses two primary questions: how the OLC pillars surface the relationship between quality and equity in online, blended, and digital learning, and how these pillars can be situated within the field's current practices of designing, facilitating, and evaluating equitable and sustainable education in digital learning environments. The review process followed a case study approach informed by autoethnographic principles and involved reflecting on the pillars' role in the current context of online learning. The findings highlight the need to differentiate between disparate definitions of online, blended, and digital learning to embrace both quality and equity, provide a set of guiding principles to support the variety of contexts within which instructors and learners pursue sustainable and equitable educational experiences, and focus on learning effectiveness that prioritizes learners meeting articulated outcomes and gaining relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Keywords:

Digital learning; online learning; blended learning; equity; quality; instructional design; digital strategy; institutional transformation

Introduction

The Online Learning Consortium's (OLC's) five pillars of Quality Online Education – learning effectiveness, scale, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction – have defined quality online learning and advanced its facilitation since their introduction in 1997. These interrelated pillars form a framework designed for educators and institutions seeking to design and assess online, blended, and digital learning experiences that center equity and quality. The pillars were also central to the development of the OLC's Quality Scorecard Suite (QSS), which provides a comprehensive set of benchmarking tools for institutions seeking to advance and assess quality program administration, blended learning programs, course design, quality course teaching, and instructional practice, digital courseware instructional practice, and online student support (Online Learning Consortium, n.d.).

Although these pillars remain foundational to online, blended, and digital educational excellence, online learning has changed drastically over the past 26 years, and so have the needs of educators and learners globally. As we proposed a book project that would explicate foundational principles and best practices for mobilizing the QSS, we were mindful of the need to assess our pillars to ensure that our definition of quality reflected the altered landscape of higher education. We were especially aware of a field-wide need to resituate our definition of quality online, blended, and digital learning within global conversations about educational equity. As we reviewed the pillars through an equity lens, we also sought to make the pillars themselves more actionable for educators, practitioners, researchers, decision-makers, and administrators.

This study details our process of evaluating the OLC pillars alongside equity criteria and reflecting on how the pillars of quality fit into the field's current work to make education more equitable through the unique affordances of online, blended, and digital learning. More specifically, we sought to answer two primary questions: (1) how do

the OLC Pillars of Quality surface the relationship between quality and equity in online, blended, and digital learning? and (2) how might the OLC Pillars of Quality be situated within the field's current practices of designing, facilitating, and iteratively improving equitable and sustainable education in digital learning environments? To answer these questions, we engaged in a multi-stage, collaborative review of the pillars that involved reflecting on the pillars' role in the current context of online, digital, and blended learning; diverse contexts within which pillars of quality are mobilized; the extent to which our descriptions centered accessibility, equity, and inclusivity criteria; and actionability of the pillars for a range of stakeholders.

Literature Review

While online learning experts agree that equity is fundamental to quality online learning experiences, significant challenges remain when mobilizing this premise across contexts and for all stakeholders. Moodle, for instance, identified seven pillars of quality: resources, communication, collaboration, assessment, accreditation, reporting, and accessibility (2021). While these are significant elements of the online education experience for instructors, the descriptions are driven by the Moodle tool's features; for instance, Moodle emphasizes their tool's ability to assist with attendance taking and predictive analytics to identify at-risk students. While these are concerns for some instructors, they are less likely to represent quality learning experiences for students and may reinforce deficit-minded policies by characterizing certain students as "at risk." New America, on the other hand, also developed a peri-pandemic report, "Back to Basics: Quality in Digital Learning," which did not address how to mobilize equity in their indicator descriptions despite the authors' acknowledgment that "The equity gaps that persist across the higher education system are also prevalent across online classes" (n.p.). This highlights the importance of discussing equity as a foundational concept and the challenge of actuating equity in quality online learning experiences.

One of the best-known rubrics for assessing online course quality, Quality Matters (QM), provides a process that can guide online course design and assessment of its quality for instructors, instructional designers, and institutional decision-makers. One of QM's strengths is that they provide separate standards for a range of online learning contexts, including higher ed, K-12, and continuing and professional education. While their distinct rubrics account for a range of activities central to online learning and the range of stakeholders who make meaning through these educational experiences, the scope of their rubric is admittedly focused on one aspect of online course facilitation. According to QM, "While the QM model focuses primarily on course design, our members can leverage the QM process — along with QM resources and community members — to scale our model and apply it to all aspects of online learning" (Quality Matters, n.d.). QM, then, does not provide a model that captures a more holistic evaluation of quality in online learning.

As this range of rubrics indicates, one of the challenges of evaluating quality is the difficulty defining what quality means to a range of stakeholders and across contexts. Hafeez et al. (2022), for instance, identified four stakeholder groups that define quality differently (providers, or "funding agencies and the general public," students, employers, and administrators/instructors (376). They also defined four categories of quality classifications, including purposeful ("compliant with a given vision or mission"), exceptional ("educational institutions achieve differentiation and exclusivity"), transformative ("[p]ositive changes in learners' performance, as well as individual and professional ability"), and accountable (institutions are "held responsible to shareholders for making the best utilization of resources and delivering high-quality" education) (2022, p. 376). The lack of consensus Hafeez et al. identify is especially troubling because, as they note, quality standards are vital to sustainable development (p. 382). Alignment is needed, then, to ensure that all stakeholders, and especially students, are benefiting from their educational experiences in the long term.

In addition to this lack of consensus surrounding quality, we are concerned about the lack of attention to equity as a foundational element of any quality online, blended, or digital learning environment. The relationship between online learning and equity itself is fraught. On the one hand, "online learning has contributed significantly to student equity, by making it possible for a wider range of people to participate and succeed in HE" (Stone, 2022, p. 140). While this increased opportunity is promising, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide's ongoing presence as a barrier to success for many students (Kono and Taylor, 2021). As Kono and Taylor (2021) demonstrated, this suggests for educators and institutional decision-makers "the critical importance of extending culturally sustainable practices to all online learning environments in higher education as a way to mitigate equity issues related to the digital divide" (p. 151).

Overall, while we were guided in our process by the need to explicate the relationship between quality and equity in online, blended, and digital learning, the models we referenced and recent scholarship yielded some surprising takeaways. We were both heartened to see other organizations grappling with quality's complexity and challenged by a field-wide lack of actionable engagement with equity. We also found it interesting that other organizations were apparently struggling to articulate quality in a way that could be leveraged in a range of contexts/for all stakeholders.

Method

Case Study Method

At the inception of this inquiry, we sought to determine a research method that would allow us to closely examine the connection between the OLC Pillars of Quality and the advancement of quality and equity in digital learning broadly. Our work within the global non-profit organization Online Learning Consortium as researchers, educators, and leaders provided us with context for understanding the complex and diverse applications of quality and equity across a wide variety of contexts. As such, we selected a case study method for its ability to capture the multiple perspectives and sociocultural factors (Stake, 1995) that shape the instantiation and sustaining of quality and equity within online and blended learning. Lastly, we chose a case study method for its focus on providing benefit to relevant stakeholders as opposed to just promulgating findings for the sake of publication (Stake, 1978). By leveraging the case study method, we hoped to produce a series of findings that would surface new approaches to applying the pillars at the course, program, and institutional levels to improve student learning outcomes and equitable access to quality education within and across different digitally-mediated learning environments.

Ethnographically-Informed Methods

In addition to utilizing a case study method to answer our research questions, we also took an ethnographically-informed approach to our analysis process. Autoethnography was selected for inclusion in our research method because of its ability to serve as "process and product" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273) within a study, capturing sociocultural phenomena reflexively in the interpretation of individual and shared experiences (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011). We also designed a research method that was informed by portraiture, a method of inquiry that combines aestheticism and empiricism in the presentation of evidenced-based practices and phenomena (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture encourages the use of language that is inclusive and accessible, focusing on the good that exists within a study over merely citing pathology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). In line with the work to examine the pillars through a lens of equity, portraiture method allowed us to identify places where equity-neutral and deficit language would inhibit the adoption of the pillars across an inclusive array of cultural contexts. Lastly, we grounded this study in a sociocultural view of teaching and learning, framing our analysis of the OLC Pillars of Quality and their usage within a constructivist community of practice engaging in collaborative meaning-making and values-aligned action (Gee, 1999; Halliday, 1978; Street, 1984). Ultimately, this combination of research methods was utilized as a means of completing a cultural analysis within which we as researchers might help to instantiate new pathways to improving access to education by advancing quality and equity within online, blended, and digital learning environments.

Process

Our process was formulated by determining the most impactful ways we might interrogate our two research questions. In answering our first research question of how the OLC Pillars of Quality surface the relationship between quality and equity in online, blended, and digital learning, our team engaged in a deliberate and reflective process that sought to explore and recontextualize the pillars for our changed world and the needs of the field in redefining our learning futures. In line with the pillars situated as discreet, interconnected dimensions of quality, we wanted to interrogate how the pillar definitions described ensuring quality across a diverse set of contexts in a way that was inclusive and equitable. To accomplish this, we reviewed other quality frameworks for correlations, redundancies, and other similarities but found nothing similar to the OLC Pillars in function or goals. We then reflected on the pillar language for inclusivity using the instrument Applying Eight Equity Principles to

Solutions Network Assets Protocol (Bensimon et al, 2020), a tool that helped us to identify areas where the language of the pillars could be improved to better promote equity and inclusion in online, blended, and digital learning contexts.

Our inquiry continued by exploring our second research question - to determine how the OLC Pillars of Quality might be situated within practices related to supporting equitable and inclusive online, blended, and digital learning environments. We engaged in a thorough examination of the methods and examples used in the descriptions of the pillars, considering each approach and recommendation for its accessibility and inclusivity, and identifying places where the recommendations could be optimized to better support the adoption of the pillars across a diverse set of contexts. Through this process, we also identified areas where the examples could be broadened to honor differentiation in the roles of those engaging with the pillar definitions, making it more actionable and relevant for practitioners in the field. In addition to examining the examples within the pillar definitions, we also identified new needs for new, multimodal formats for presenting the pillars (i.e. playbooks, action guides) that would increase relevance, buy-in, and actionability.

Findings

The Complementary Nature of Quality and Equity

In completing our review of the OLC's Pillars of Quality, we observed a demonstrated need for differentiating between disparate definitions of online, blended, and digital learning to find one that embraced both quality and equity. In many cases, this involved being mindful of potential deficit language and framing. For instance, in our review of the OLC Access pillar, we preserved the emphasis on facilitating access throughout the student's lifecycle but shifted away from a model that would tout "equal access" (which risks making real barriers students face invisible) in favor of a model that actively centers inclusivity while removing barriers to student success and engagement. We more explicitly name populations likely to face such barriers due to discriminatory practices and reduce the emphasis on support services. This work is especially important now, as the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide through the shift to emergency remote teaching even as it created opportunities for more students to access quality education. We are also driven by the increased focus on equity and social justice within and outside of the classroom and our responsibility to provide actionable strategies for educators and students that can help them meaningfully engage in these conversations and develop pedagogies that are responsive to them.

Our review also highlighted our need for a set of guiding principles to support the variety of contexts within which instructors (broadly conceived) and learners seek to facilitate sustainable and equitable educational experiences. As we have noted in our review of the literature, we were surprised by the lack of frameworks to support this need, since most of the other pillars we referenced focused on higher education learning environments and emphasized the role that faculty and university decision-makers play and the ways in which they define quality. In our review of the OLC pillars, we recommended shifting language that emphasized higher education contexts, such as "student" and "faculty," to the more inclusive terms, "learner" and "instructor." In making this recommendation, we were particularly mindful of professional contexts and corporate training online learning experiences wherein these pillars might be deployed. We were also challenged to reconsider what "learning effectiveness" means when stakeholders (students, professionals, etc.) may have different goals for their learning experiences. We recommended changing language that focused on students receiving a high-quality education and toward a model of learning effectiveness that prioritizes learners "meeting articulated learning outcomes that result in them gaining meaningful and impactful competencies and skills." This approach encompasses a wider range of stakeholders, contexts, and, importantly, potential outcomes for learning.

We were pleased to find that our review of the pillars highlighted their ongoing relevance to our current work in addressing access to a quality and meaningful educational experience through the unique affordances of digital learning. Our pillar review provoked important questions about whether pillars of quality should remain constant or whether they should change over time. Do the pillars need to change when the higher education landscape shifts, and if so, how can we adjust the pillars quickly enough to keep up? Or, as we suspected, do we need to revise the pillars on a regular basis to ensure their framing and contextualization continue to meet the needs of the present while anticipating future challenges and trends? Despite some suggested phrasing changes (for instance, we suggested that Instructor Satisfaction and Student Satisfaction become Instructor Success and

Learner Success, respectively), the pillars themselves still instantiated quality online education while accounting for blended, hybrid, and digital learning contexts, as well.

Diverse Exemplars of Quality and Equity

In our exploration of our second research question, we sought to determine how the usage of the OLC Pillars of Quality might be contextualized within our current practices for designing, facilitating, and continuously improving equitable and sustainable education within digital learning. In following this line of inquiry and our subsequent analysis of the usage of the pillars across a manifold of sociocultural contexts, we determined that while the impact of the pillars in supporting the advancement of equitable digital learning was strong, this impact could be extended through the inclusion of a diverse set of exemplars as annotations to the pillar definitions. These exemplars would show that the pillar definitions were not meant to sit as a monolithic blueprint for quality online learning, offering rich and multifaceted applications of the pillars that would be actionable by institutions and stakeholders from a wide variety of contexts.

We also discovered that the language used within the pillar definitions could be broadened to be more inclusive of the entirety of the learner population, and not a subset of a privileged few. This was most evident in the definition of the pillar of scale, which surfaced a tension space within the field around historical views of the focus of online learning as the path to increased revenue, rather than the path to ubiquitous access to education and scale being an indicator of that inclusivity of learner populations. We also discovered an opportunity for the pillars to extend their accessibility through the usage of learner-centered language, both in the inclusion of examples that relate to increasing student agency, meaning-making, and personal goal setting, as well as acknowledging that those utilizing the pillars might not be teaching students in credit-bearing courses alone, but also faculty, staff, administrators, and participants in trainings and certifications. We noted a potential place for improvement in moving from language related to student and faculty satisfaction to defining learner and faculty success as a means of making these pillar definitions more inclusive of the effective practices needed to promote success as defined within unique organizational contexts rather than an individual's highly-personalized happiness with the learning environment independent of its efficacy or impact.

Lastly, we determined that extending the accessibility and strength of the pillars could be achieved by remixing the current format of the pillars as a list of static text-based definitions into a series of multimodal resources. Through a series of action guides, playbooks, or collections of portraits of usage across different institutions and contexts, stakeholders of all roles would be able to better apply the pillars to their daily work in advancing access to quality online, blended, and digital learning in sustainable and inclusive ways.

Conclusion

The OLC pillars have the ability to transform the ways in which we think about teaching and learning across a diverse set of sociocultural contexts. We as a field need to be paying attention to these frameworks and taxonomies and better understand how we can help each other and our students. We also need to regularly engage in inclusive review processes that ensure the usefulness of such frameworks for the communities we serve and their actionability in an ever-expanding range of educational contexts. As we consider how to meet the needs of the present while anticipating what is on the horizon, we are especially excited by the generative potential of these pillars as they elucidate challenges facing instructors, learners, and institutions and opportunities for sustainable development.

References

- Acosta, A., Palmer, I., & Romo-González, L. (2021, July 13). *The five pillars of quality digital learning*. New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/back-to-basics/>
- Adams, T.E., Ellis, C., & Jones, S.H. (2017). Autoethnography. *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, 1-11.
- Bensimon, E.M., Chase, M.M., & Harper, S. (2020). *Applying eight equity principles to solutions network assets protocol*. Bensimon & Associates, USC Race and Equity Center.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T.E., & Bochner, A.P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical social research/Historische*

sozialforschung, 273-290.

Gee, J. (1999). *The new literacy studies and the "Social Turn."*

Hafeez, M., Naureen, S., & Sultan, S., 2022. Quality Indicators and Models for Online Learning Quality Assurance in Higher Education. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 20(4), 374-385.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. Maryland. University Park Press.

Kono, K. G., & Taylor, S. (2021). *Using an ethos of care to bridge the digital divide: Exploring faculty narratives during a global pandemic*. *Online Learning*, 25(1), 151–165. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i1.2484>

Lawrence-Lightfoot, S., & Davis, J.H. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. Jossey-Bass.

Moodle. (2021, January 20). 7 pillars for quality education online. <https://moodle.com/news/7-pillars-for-quality-education-online/>

Online Learning Consortium. (n.d.). OLC quality scorecard suite. <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/consult/olc-quality-scorecard-suite/>

Quality Matters. (n.d.). QM rubrics and standards. <https://www.qualitymatters.org/index.php/ga-resources/rubric-standards>

Stake, R.E. (1978). The case study method in social inquiry. *Educational researcher*, 7(2), 5-8.

Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

Stone, C. (2022). *From the margins to the mainstream: The online learning rethink and its implications for enhancing student equity*. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(6), 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8136>