Standards for online teaching: lessons from the education, health and IT sectors

David M Kennedy*

School of Health, Nursing and Midwifery, University of Paisley, High Street, Paisley PA1 2BE, UK

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Summary

Online teaching is a growing, but not a new, phenomenon. It is most associated with distance education, but it also features in classroom education, in the form of blended learning.

During this period of growth in online teaching, there has been time for the development of standards to ensure its quality. Yet the standards that have emerged tend to be derivatives of the standards for conventional, classroom teaching. They do not adequately address the specific demands of online education. Is this acceptable for online teachers? Is it supportive of online students?

This contribution to the debate outlines how nurse educators can generate – and are generating – credible standards for their online practice. It identifies flaws in the current guidance for online teachers. It points out that knowledge of standard setting in the health service can support standard setting in higher education. And it highlights that the most useful guidance for the online teacher comes not from the education sector but from the industrial sector, specifically from the IT industry. It finishes on a practical note, describing how nurse educators in the University of Paisley are using these findings to develop standards for their online teaching practice.

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KEYWORDS

Online teaching; Standards

Introduction

One of the most recent forms of distance education is networked, online distance education. But with a 29-year history behind it (Harasim, 2000), it is not ‘new’.

Moreover, techniques that were seen as exclusively ‘distance’ teaching are now features of classroom teaching. Blended learning, for example, combines technology-supported education with traditional education or training (Smith, 2001). We are witnessing the merging of the technologies and techniques that support different
forms of teaching in the interests of more effective education.

Within this period of development, there has been time to develop standards for online teaching. And yet the standards that have emerged, for example, from the Quality Assurance Agency (1999) and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (Morley, 2000), have a tendency to be derivatives of the standards that already exist for conventional, classroom teaching. Is this acceptable?

This contribution to the debate outlines a method by which credible, realistic and helpful standards for practising online teachers can be generated — and are being generated.

Preliminary comments on standards

Standards are never neutral features in a landscape. They provoke reaction. They indicate behaviours to which the practitioners of a discipline aspire — or which some may wish to circumvent. So before examining standard setting, it is important to examine the significance of standards in professional practice. Four important significances are the role that standards play, the characteristics of standards, their multiple effects and their dangers.

The role of standards

Standards are only one element in the wider issue of quality. They represent one step in a strategy towards ensuring quality, not the entire strategy. They do not of themselves guarantee quality. This is a fact that the UK health services have grasped. Øvretveit (1992, p. 1) for instance, points out that it is people and processes, not principally standard setting and inspection, that are fundamental to a quality health service.

The characteristics of standards

Standards are specifications of the agreed properties of a product or service. They are not notional views of what looks good. Nicklin and Kenworthy (2000) point out that useful standards have four over-arching characteristics. Useful standards are:

- **meaningful**: those who apply them understand them and value them as relevant,
- **measurable**: key standards state behaviours that can be observed in action,
- **monitorable**: the host organisation has recognised processes to ensure that people are working to the standard,
- **managed**: at the corporate level, the organisation has a framework for establishing and monitoring standards; at the individual level, each person has a strategy for applying them.

The multiple effects of standards

Setting standards for one sector in an enterprise has implications for its other sectors. Øvretveit (1998) identifies three dimensions of health service quality — client quality (the perception by the patient on whether the service is meeting his or her needs), professional quality (the view of health professionals on whether the service is meeting the needs of patients) and management quality (whether the service is making most effective use of resources to meet the needs of patients). There is an important principle here: there is no such thing as unilateral standard setting in services which require collaboration for their delivery. When one group of health professionals sets standards for their performance, that act has implications for the actions and responsibilities of other health professionals, patients, relatives and administrators. The same dynamics apply in educational practice.

The dangers of standards

There are dangers, too, in standard setting initiatives. By starting with standards we can be in danger of losing the wider focus of what standards represent. First, we have to take the preceding step of selecting quality features, before we try to develop standards. For example, teachers have to ask, ‘What features of online teaching must have priority?’ before they consider the subsequent question, ‘What are the appropriate standards of performance that we should apply to these features?’ This is a necessary part of the quality cycle (Øvretveit (1992)) and of the benchmarking process (Ellis, 2002). If online teachers do not take this step first, then the danger is that quality apparatchiks will draw up standards for every issue in online education. Then already-busy teachers will become resentful of a process which is supposed to support them in their work but has begun to impede their efforts.

Moreover, an attempt at standard setting can lead not to an enhancement of a service but to a deterioration in its quality. The Praxiom Research Group (2004) make this point in their analysis of
the way some organisations introduce standards set by the International Standardization Organization (ISO). They warn that organisations may introduce individual standards as a means of fixing discrete problems of quality, without introducing a coherent quality system. This can be counter-productive. Managers can believe they are remedying a problem related to quality when in fact they are introducing further problems by adding extra demands in the absence of a clear rationale or coherent framework. Individual employees can become demoralised with the difficulty of meeting standards that do not deliver quality. And the time and effort of developing such standards can outweigh their worth to the organisation.

**Standards in education**

Standard setting in education is informed by the same principles as those made explicit in the previous section. Educators need processes that both achieve the results they want (workable standards that ensure quality education) and that reflect the values of the people who will operate them and the values of the service they provide. Educators can use standards to help ensure a quality service, but the driver must not be external measures, such as inspection and audit, but shared values, such as delivering a service that meets the needs of those who are dependent on it, and a mutual agreement to work to these. Standards are a mechanism for freeing educators up to develop and deliver best practice, not a mechanism for specifying the minimum to which educators should aim to keep out of trouble.

In education as in the health services, the principle of multiple effects applies. Professional educators cannot create standards for their teaching behaviour without taking into account the implications this will have on the learning behaviour of students or on the administrative processes of educational administrators. Education standard setters have to take a holistic view of the effects of their work.

Professional educators have also articulated other worries about standards and other quality mechanisms. Hussey and Smith (2002), for example, point out that a focus on standards can represent the commodification of education and a loss of trust in the educators. When a profession resorts to the explicit use of standards to persuade users of the quality of its services, that very action can indicate that the service has been flawed in some respect and has got something to rectify.

It is with a mixture of these confidences in, and caveats about, standards that we can move on to standards for online education. Our starting point is the standards for online teaching that currently exist.

**Standards for online teaching: the British perspective**

Online teachers are not without guidance. Explicit standards for online teaching already exist.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has published ‘Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Distance Learning’ (Quality Assurance Agency, 1999). The main thrust of these guidelines is to ‘build on principles which apply generally to higher education and relate these principles to distance learning provision’ (p. 3). They see the foundation of standards for teachers supporting online learners as standards for teachers providing education in any setting – distance or institution-based. The UK Government’s white paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) on the future of higher education reflects the increasing trend to see e-learning as embedded in the natural processes of learning (O’Leary, 2003). What was novel is becoming normal.

The QAA identifies areas where specific attention to standards in distance learning is required. These are system design, programme design and delivery, student development and support, student communication and representation, and student assessment. However, the QAA guidelines do not yet include specific standards for teachers that can be applied to the daily task of on-line teaching. Of their 23 precepts, 22 address the institution rather than the teacher. In terms of guidance for the practising teacher, their standards are not yet ‘meaningful’.

The United Kingdom-based Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) takes a more pragmatic view of standards in distance education. Its version of standards for teachers covers three areas: study skills, technology skills and teaching skills (Morley, 2000). This wide yet practical view is important. Teachers need guidance on helping students to adjust to online learning. Of their 23 precepts, 22 address the institution rather than the teacher. In terms of guidance for the practising teacher, their standards are not yet ‘meaningful’.

The United Kingdom-based Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC) takes a more pragmatic view of standards in distance education. Its version of standards for teachers covers three areas: study skills, technology skills and teaching skills (Morley, 2000). This wide yet practical view is important. Teachers need guidance on helping students to adjust to online learning. The ODLQC provides worthy guidelines. But of the nine standards listed, only one – ‘Understand the special requirements of open and distance learning’ – is explicitly related to online teaching. The others are all equally applicable to campus-based learning and teaching.
This raises the issue: Are these bodies failing to address the unique issues that the online teacher faces? Are other bodies grasping the nettle?

Standards for online teaching: an international perspective

Online education is by nature 'borderless education' (Davies, 2001). Examples from the wider international perspective are particularly instructive. We can gain an insight into how online teachers in different cultures are developing standards for their teaching by looking at three well-established distance education institutions from three continents.

In the United States of America, The University of Wisconsin-Extension specialises in online education. Its approach to the development of quality standards for online teaching has mirrored an approach recommended here: that teachers first identify quality features and then go on to develop standards. The quality education taskforce carried out a consultative exercise with practitioners from January to June 1996 (Gibson, 1996). Their means of consultation was an online listserv discussion board. From that exercise teachers identified their priority quality features for online teaching. These are fundamentally four. Teachers should

- know their learners,
- design for active learning,
- support learners and
- evaluate on an ongoing basis.

Within these quality features, these teachers then went on to identify specific features for which teachers would write standards. For example, within the priority feature of ‘knowing the learner’ they identified that the teacher should know their students’ learning needs and styles, their prior knowledge and experience in the discipline, their prior experience with distance education, any special needs and/or disabilities and relevant demographic information about their students (Gibson, 1996).

But these standards are weak in terms of helping the online teacher. Their emphasis is on generic ‘knowledge about the learner’ and not sufficiently about applying that knowledge in an online learning environment.

In South Africa, The National Association of Distance Educators of South Africa (NADEOSA) is a consortium of 58 distance education organisations. It has created a quality standards framework in distance education which the South African government’s Department of Education accepted (South African Department of Education, 1998). But scrutiny of the framework shows that the emphasis is almost exclusively on the quality of course design and materials. There is very little guidance to ensure the quality of online teaching.

In 2000, SchoolNet South Africa built on NADEOSA’s work to prepare Pedagogical Principles and Interactivity guidelines for online teachers. However, the same deficiency appears: only 4 of the 13 principles are specifically related to online pedagogy, and that in the most general way. For example the first guideline states, ‘Opportunities for asynchronous interaction should be provided in the form of bulletin board/forums and mailing lists’ (SchoolNet South Africa, 2000). The teacher’s role in converting asynchronous interaction into a learning opportunity is not discussed. There is a continuing need for better, more specific standards for the online teacher. NADEOSA are aware of this (National Association of Distance Educators of South Africa, 2003).

Curtin University, Australia, has introduced an initiative called Standards for Online Teaching (SOLT) (Curtin University of Technology Learning Support Network, 2003). The focus in this initiative is standards for teaching websites, rather than on standards for online teaching. So the online teacher will find guidance on how to apply a standard rating system to his or her teaching website and meet generic quality criteria. This is helpful — but limited. The teacher consulting these standards will not find practical guidance for his or her online teaching practice.

These are illustrative examples from educational institutions with credible reputations for online teaching and learning in three continents. They indicate the tendency for current standards for online teaching to reflect generic teaching standards rather than the specific competencies that online teachers should possess or develop.

The online teacher needs more specific guidance on standards than is currently available. As Thorpe (2002, p. 115) points out, ‘teaching online, particularly fostering collaboration and a constructivist approach, requires novel skills and attitudes for many educators’.

The contribution of nurse educators

Nurse educators are in a strong position to develop standards for online education. Many are already involved in online teaching. Moreover, their experience of the health services, with their developed
culture of standard setting, gives them a grasp of quality issues that outstrips quality awareness in the higher education sector. Nurse educators can also apply quality enhancement techniques used by their clinical colleagues. The principles upon which clinical practitioners formulate guidelines for best practice are directly applicable to best practice in nurse education. These principles include

- orientation to practice,
- use of evidence to substantiate practice,
- consensus in decision-making,
- selecting priority areas,
- aiming for achievability,
- testing in practice before confirming in policy.

Such principles approximate well to the rubric of ’meaningful, measurable, monitorable and manageable standards’ that this paper has advocated.

Nurse educators who are not yet teaching online already possess relevant and transferable skills: skills in small group teaching, course design, resource-based learning, one-to-one guidance and mentoring, and assessment of both theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

Moreover, nurse educators do not start from scratch in the search to develop standards for online teaching. Appropriate standards exist already — but not in the education sector. These can be found in industry, specifically in the information technology (IT) sector. The Institute of IT Training (2001) takes a competence-based view of standards for online teaching. Its competencies for online tutors provide a comprehensive framework for pedagogical strategy, technical and administrative support and interactive and supportive relationships with students. For example, in its 'Competencies for e-tutors' it gives practical guidance to online tutors in the following areas:

- planning e-tutoring,
- establishing the appropriate technical facilities for their brand of online teaching,
- establishing an appropriate collaborative relationship with new learners,
- communicating appropriately with learners,
- providing administrative support,
- equipping their learners with both technical and subject-matter expertise,
- initiating activities that will facilitate learning,
- providing learners with support and encouragement,
- assessing learners’ performance — including their online performance,
- how to communicate effectively with learners using the appropriate online tools,
- using bulletin boards and discussion forums for communication with and between students,
- using the relevant conferencing tools for communication with and between students, and
- evaluating and improving their online support.

This guidance is practical and evidence-based. It addresses the needs of the online teacher at a level of detail with which bodies like the QAA have not yet engaged. It meets the requirement that standards that apply to online teaching should be meaningful, measurable, monitorable and manageable.

From the evidence of the foregoing, we can formulate a strategy for the development of standards for online teaching: first, identify and apply general standards for sound pedagogy; secondly, identify, build upon and modify existing standards that others have successfully developed and applied for their online practice.

A practical method for teachers developing standards for online teaching

The principles of standard setting outlined above can be combined effectively with the tools of online learning. This is the approach of online nurse educators in the University of Paisley.

One of the most productive tools for online learning and teaching is the asynchronous discussion function which virtual learning environments incorporate. Participants in an asynchronous discussion share ideas on a specific topic by posting electronic messages to a central site on a web server. The server displays these messages for all participants to view in an area called variously a 'bulletin board' or 'discussion board'. The strength of this form of online discussion is that it allows for reflection, the display of evidence to support ideas, close analysis and critical appraisal of propositions. It is not dependent on off-the-cuff responses.

As in any group discussion, there are disciplines that enhance productiveness. For example, setting a start and end date for the discussion, giving guidance about how to participate effectively, limiting the discussion to a few ‘threads’ (topics). The moderator of an asynchronous discussion sets ground rules, or agrees them with the participants, that encourage rather than discourage participation.

As a generic tool, asynchronous discussion has major strengths in enabling the generation of co-operative ideas. Nurse educators in the University of Paisley use it as a foundational learning tool in the B.Sc. Health Studies/B.Sc. Nursing online degree programme. But they also use it as a foundational tool to develop their own online teaching practice.
The B.Sc. Health Studies/B.Sc. Nursing teaching team have used asynchronous online discussion as a tool for generating standards for online teaching. The steps have been the following:

- The moderator (the Director of the B.Sc. Health Studies/B.Sc. Nursing distance learning programme) initiated the discussion and acted as online chairperson.
- The moderator proposed topics in sequence. For example, the first discussion topic was: 'What minimum preparation, of materials and of the contents of the virtual learning environment, are necessary before your online module begins?'
- The discussion then moved on to the actual process of teaching: 'In your experience of online teaching, what has 'worked'' and what has 'not worked'' ?'
- A subsequent topic was, 'Refer to the URL for the Institute of IT Trainers website in the external links and review their competencies for online teachers. Then add your thoughts on whether we could/should adopt some/all/none of these competencies'.
- All teachers in the degree programme contributed. Because the discussion related to their own practice, and to generating standards for their own online teaching, motivation to participate was high. The method met the criterion that standards should be 'meaningful' to those who will work to them.
- When each stage of the discussion reached its closing date, the moderator made a digest summary of the conclusions. A flaw in our practice was the failure to specify closing dates clearly and consistently for each stage. The discussion lost momentum at times.
- The digest summaries proposed good practice guidelines for preparing online modules, using learning contracts, induction for online teachers, collaborating with administrators, supporting students, and giving feedback to students on their assessments. Table 1 in Appendix A gives examples from the initial good practice guidelines.
- The moderator circulated the proposed standards for all participants for review, critique and group modification.
- The moderator then communicated the proposed standards to the Dean of Faculty.
- Senate reviewed the proposed standards and commended them to the wider university community for review and critique. (This consultation process continues.)

Online discussions do not necessarily follow a smooth path, and this discussion has been no exception. Periods of productive interactivity alternated with periods of unproductive quiet.

Conclusion

Online learning and teaching are activities that have their own skills and disciplines. They are not fundamentally different from other methods of learning and teaching, but they do require some different approaches and competencies.

Current initiatives to guide the online teacher are missing the distinctive elements that are part of the portfolio of skills that the online teacher has to develop. This is not a United Kingdom-only phenomenon, but an international phenomenon. One reason for its emergence is that the approach to formulating standards for online teaching has not grasped the nettle that such standards have to be meaningful, measurable, monitorable and manageable. Common mistakes are the tendency to pitch standards for online teaching at the level of the institution, rather than at the level of the teacher; a focus on the technology rather than the teaching; and a top-down rather than a collaborative bottom-up approach. These failings mean that current standards for online teaching are not adequately supporting the skills development of online teachers — or the quality of learning of their students.

Online teaching technology provides a tool by which online teachers can formulate standards for online teaching that are educationally sound, institutionally meaningful and locally relevant. Nurse teachers in the University of Paisley have demonstrated that the use of asynchronous discussions can facilitate the development of standards for online teaching that are both personally owned and founded on wider best practice. They have derived their strategy for formulating such standards from their experience of quality mechanisms within the health services. To develop best practice, they have moved out of the educational sphere and learned from the experiences of the IT industry.

Appendix A. Table containing examples from the good practice checklist for online teachers in the university of paisley

See Table 1.
Table 1  Examples from good practice checklist for online teachers in the University of Paisley

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Date/Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of activities to be completed before the module commences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a timetable containing a list of key module events including:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• start and end dates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dates of synchronous and asynchronous discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• assignment release, submission and return dates</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Receive from the module administrator a list of all students registered</td>
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<tr>
<td>in the module, including name, matriculation number and e-mail address</td>
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<tr>
<td>Send an advance e-mail to the student group notifying them of the</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>commencement of the module and the timetable of activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Upload into the virtual learning environment an appropriate list of</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>additional reading materials/external links</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of activities to be carried out at the beginning of the module</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Display a ‘Welcome’ announcement in the virtual learning environment</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Upload into the virtual learning environment a timetable of the key</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>module events</td>
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<tr>
<td>On the day the module commences, send a welcome e-mail message to each</td>
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<tr>
<td>student and request an immediate confirmatory reply</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notify students that the teacher will normally reply to any student</td>
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<tr>
<td>inquiry within 24 h (Monday–Friday).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage students to post their details on their student page</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of activities to be carried out as the module progresses</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage/promote active online discussions using the PACE (participation,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>addition, constructive criticism and encouragement) guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage/promote participation in at least 75% of online discussions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor students’ participation using the course statistics provided by</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the virtual learning environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contact apparently non-participating students with a view to providing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>appropriate support</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of activities related to assessment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create assignments that relate to learning outcomes and test students</td>
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<tr>
<td>at an appropriate level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Display clear guidelines on how marks are allocated for online</td>
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<tr>
<td>participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>When critiquing students’ assignments give specific feedback on</td>
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<tr>
<td>strengths and weaknesses for that assignment, how the student has</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>gained the marks awarded, how this work relates to previous work and</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>recommendations for maintenance or improvement of performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complete the mark sheet and identify any work specifically requiring</td>
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<tr>
<td>moderation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

References


