EVALUATION OF A PROTOTYPE PSYCHOLOGY COURSE FOR ADULT EDUCATION

WELKO TOMIC
The Open University
Heerlen, The Netherlands

Summary.—This paper deals with the evaluation of a prototype introductory psychology course for The (Dutch) Open University. For this purpose a random sample of 400 students completed a questionnaire asking them to evaluate course content, arrangement of course material, level of difficulty, expectations for the course, opportunities to monitor one’s own progress, self-instruction strategies, usefulness of the study guide, use of prior knowledge related to the course, and workload. The responses to most questions were positive. It appears, however, that students made only limited use of audiovisual aids and those who did were not positive about its effectiveness. The nominal workload was exceeded amply. Students preferred an integration of the textbook and the study guide.

The Open University of The Netherlands is an institute of higher education providing distance teaching for adults. It is comparable with the British Open University. Applicants must be at least 18 years old to be admitted. Admission is “open”; in other words, there are no admission requirements with respect to prior schooling. Students may begin at various entry levels. In some ways, at least, the program would be similar to correspondence courses in the United States.

The subject matter is presented in the broadest sense, books, demonstrations, practicals, computer simulations, etc. Because The Open University is an institute of distance education, students must be able to learn the subject matter without the help of an instructor. Obviously those who design courses must firstly focus attention on course content. Also, they must be careful to build in instructional features that suit the subject matter and can replace instructors. Thirdly, they must concentrate on developing course material.

In this article we describe the evaluation of the prototype developed for an introductory course in psychology.

Course Evaluation

The course designers performed an evaluative study exploring whether, and to what extent, the target group actually achieved the learning objectives set out in the course (Kempkens, 1989). This was done by testing and evalu-

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ating the course in the context for which it was designed to assess whether the solution they selected was adequate. This evaluation was summative, meaning that the designers gathered data on the success or failure of the course with a view to improving it (Van der Wolde, 1992). In the next section we describe the results of the postcourse evaluation questionnaire sent to students.

**Method**

A random sample of 400 subjects (women and men) was chosen from a population of 1814 students who took the psychology course and who lived in The Netherlands. Of this population, 66% (n = 1197) were women, 77% (n = 1396) were under the age of 41 years, and 31% (n = 562) had not reached the Dutch HAVO level (Higher General Secondary Education).

The postcourse evaluation data were obtained from students who completed questions evaluating course content, whether the course satisfied their expectations, arrangement of the course material, how various course sections functioned, whether the course allowed them to monitor their own progress, the use of self-instruction strategies in the course, the usefulness of the study guide, the figures given in the margins of the text, the schema and content of the glossary, how representative the final examination was, different sections of the study guide, chapter length, whether the course related to their prior knowledge of the subject, the difficulty, the usefulness of the audiovisual aids, the usefulness of the audiocassette, the actual workload, and whether the course content required revision. Concerning evaluation the main emphasis was on “acceptability.” “Efficiency” was briefly referred to as time spent on study by the respondents and the use of audiovisual aids. Students evaluated the above items on a 5-point scale ranging from negative to positive. Of the 400 students who were sent the questionnaire, 59% (236) responded.

A comparison between the course population and the respondents showed that the respondents were more likely to be employed, worked longer hours on a weekly basis (>35 hours) and studied for work or professional reasons. Their behavior was geared toward obtaining good grades. They also indicated more frequently that studying at traditional universities would be almost impossible. Students with the above characteristics were overrepresented among respondents, which may have influenced the responses to the questionnaire.

**Results**

The students assessed as positive to very positive the course content (94%). In their opinion, the course content satisfied their expectations (69%). Those students with less prior schooling were less satisfied with the content than those with more schooling.
Concerning the arrangement of the course material, the students assessed this as positive (95%). The didactic presentation of the material was also given a positive rating (89%). Almost all of the students understood clearly how the various course sections functioned (93%). They felt that the study guide generally gave them enough assistance in studying the texts (79%). A large group of students indicated that the course offered sufficient opportunity to monitor one’s own progress in mastering the various course sections (75%). For the most part the students used the separate sections of the study guide almost all of the time. In particular, the diagnostic tests and summative test were viewed positively; students made least use of the learning objectives.

Most of the students found the chapter length satisfactory (69%). The question arose whether students with different educational backgrounds would evaluate long chapters differently. Students with less prior schooling had more objections about long chapters than students with more prior schooling.

The figures used in the margins of the text were given a positive rating (79%).

The students were reasonably positive about the final examination; 69% found that the questions posed on the examination met their expectations based on the questions on the diagnostic tests and the summative test. The final examination was considered representative of the subject matter by 75%. The students criticized specifically the multiple-choice format.

In general, the students felt that they had enough prior knowledge to understand the course. A quarter of the students judged their knowledge of biology and statistics as insufficient. There is a relation between amount of education and the students’ notion about their prior knowledge. There was no association between education and students’ assessment of the course’s difficulty.

Students assessed difficulty of the course positively (92%). A few sections of the course were judged too difficult by the students, for example, the section treating the biological aspects of behavior and sensory processes. In relative terms these sections were often cited as impossible to comprehend without assistance. Students with less prior schooling and those with more prior schooling did not differ in their assessment of difficulty.

The students were asked to estimate workload, how much time they had spent on each section already studied and actual workload for the entire course. If we calculate the workload over the entire course, we reach an average of approximately 265 hours, which is 32% higher than the nominal figure set for the course. The response to the second question also indicated that students exceeded the formal workload set for the course; 25% required one-quarter more time than designers estimated.
Thirty-five percent of students did not view the audiovisual program. One-third (34%) of the students used all sections. Forty percent used the audiocassette. Students who used these sections stated they did not learn much from the audiovisual program or the audiocassette.

Ninety percent of the students believed that the course did not require revision.

REFERENCES


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