

# Focus Group Evaluation for Web-based Courses

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**Objective:** To use formative and summative evaluation models to evaluate the acceptability of a Web-based course.

**Design:** The design was a natural experiment. A Web-based course had been developed as an Introduction to Health Informatics. The same course had been taught several times by the same instructor. The evaluation model was to test the acceptability, accessibility and availability of the course material if the course was Web-based. The outcomes for the course were the same in both the Web-based and seminar based formats. The outcomes included both individual papers and 'scientific poster sessions' for the students' understanding of the concepts.

**Population, Sample, Setting, Years:** The population for the project included 10 students. For all of the students, this was their first Web-based course. The course was not advertised as a Web-based course. Students were only told of the Web-based nature of the course at the first meeting. All students signed informed consent before participating in the study.

**Methods:** The primary method used was a focus group approach that was recorded and transcribed. This happened weekly. Observers reviewed the actions taken by students in navigating the material on 4 occasions. The reviewers kept their own notes and did not share them with the students. The notes were later compared for commonalities in problem areas or student discussions. The variables reported were the self-reported components that led to students liking or not liking the material presented each week. The students were asked to review and reflect on the material presented in the previous weeks Web-based material. They were asked each week to comment on the appropriateness of the material, the depth or amount of material, the way the material was arranged or organized, the organizational and navigational aspects of the interface, the area that gave them the most difficulty and the area which they found to be most successful. In addition, observers watched the students navigating through course material. The recorded the areas that appeared to be problematic for students and asked the students

to clarify their reasons for navigating in a particular way

**Findings:** Generally the findings revealed that the students were receptive to the idea of Web-based courses and felt that it allowed for successful learning of the materials. Both the final papers and 'poster session' supported this. The students varied widely in the amount of time that they said they applied to the course material. The amount of time did not appear to be consistent from week to week for the same student, not did the topic area seem to be a variable in understanding the amount of time spent. The nursing students did not seem to have more difficulty than the non-nursing students in studying concepts that were removed from nursing such as network typology and knowledge modeling. In areas related to their own discipline e.g. nursing taxonomies, nursing students had a higher level of interest than did students from other disciplines but they did not spend more time in the area.

**Conclusions:** A well-designed Web-based course that is highly interactive can achieve the same high level of student success as an on-campus seminar based course. Students did not find that 'typing based chat rooms' were as successful in understanding complex information as the audio based discussions. Students who described their computer illiteracy in the beginning had no more difficulty than other students.

## References

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