



Orienting students to online learning: going like a dream or still a nightmare?

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Effectively orienting students to online learning appears to be a vital factor in both their initial engagement and ultimate success in eLearning courses. This paper outlines the approach taken at a private tertiary institution and discusses six months of student feedback about their resulting preparedness for online study and their understanding of the role of the online learning community in supporting the success of their learning journey.

Keywords: Induction, orientation, online, retention, success, learning community, engagement

Introduction

Students have been expected to engage with online learning at tertiary level now for over a decade. Crucial to that engagement is an appropriate orientation or induction to the environment, to the skills they will need, to the support that is available and to their fellow students, not only for the creation of an online community but to hopefully reduce the drop out rate and so improve student retention and success. After ten years, what then have we learned about effective orientation processes and what do they look like?

A quick scan of the literature suggests we have learned a great deal about the components of an effective orientation. The importance of students becoming familiar with the online environment and the interactive tools they will be using in order to overcome anxiety and other technical issues has been discussed by McNikle (1999), Salmon (2000), Brace-Govan, Luxton & Wagstaff, (2001), Bozarth, Chapman & laMonica (2004), Motteram & Foster (2005), Levy (2006), Carruth, Broussard, Waldmeier, Gauethier, & Mixon, (2010) and Jones (2013).

In addition, the link between effective orientation and student retention has been made by Yorke (1999), Nash (2005), Wozniak, Mahony, Pizzica & Koulias, (2007) and Schofield & Sackville (2010), while research on effective initial student engagement with online learning communities, which suggests students need instruction specifically on that aspect has been discussed by Geer (2003), Meyer (2004), and Price, Richardson, & Jelfs, (2007).

So it would appear that the dream online orientation course which would increase student chances of making a good beginning and seeing their studies through to the end would have elements of the following:

- A timely familiarization for students to the technological and information skills they will need to succeed
- An introduction to core study and time management skills for autonomous learning
- An exploration of the academic writing skills and standards that are expected
- A summary of the student support that is available
- Meaningful activities to foster initial engagement and provide early feedback
- Guidelines and opportunities for social (and initial professional) online interaction

Success of the online orientation would be measured by how well students felt prepared for their online courses in terms of academic expectations, their comfort levels with the technology required and familiarity with the online environment they will be working in, and, ultimately, lower attrition rates.

This paper describes the elements of an online orientation “course” offered free to students at a private New Zealand tertiary provider before they commence their early childhood programmes of study. It presents the results of six months of student evaluations of the “course” and discusses the initial findings. It is a work in progress as the effects on student retention are yet to be measured.

The orientation course

“Learning with *NZTC Online*” is a non-credit bearing course within the LMS in which all beginning students are enrolled immediately on acceptance for study at the College. Via a Welcome email, students are provided with their login and password and directed to the site. They have two weeks to a month to complete the course “assessment” and activities, depending on their real course commencement dates. The lecturer of the course monitors their engagement and contacts them via email if they have not appeared online within a week of their welcome (she receives a copy) and again after two weeks of silence. This escalates to a phone call after that period to check all is well if they have still not engaged with the online materials and activities. There is a compulsory “assessment” which encourages students to consider how they will make the most of the online environment, be a “noisy” learner in their courses and requires them to practise and demonstrate a number of the technological skills required in formatting, submitting and later retrieving feedback on their real assessments. The task is marked promptly (although the outcome doesn’t get recorded) and returned to them with feedback about the content as well as the presentation and referencing aspects.

The course site itself is arranged in an identical format to their real courses. The initial page contains the course description and learning outcomes, information about the assessment and the content that will be covered. The actual content of this course though, is an introduction to all the features of the LMS that they will be using during their studies. There are communication tool activities to participate in, a guided exploration of the useful information linked to the Homepage and various videos introducing the value and use of discussion forums, the assessment submission process and the support team provided by the College. Student attention is also drawn to the Academic Skills Support part of the site that will guide them in the analysis, formatting and referencing of their “assessment”.

Research (such as that by Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby, & Higgins 2012) confirms the value of early engagement, therefore participation in the activities is expected and tracked. Discussion forum postings in both the Academic forum where they are asked to introduce themselves, and the Support forum (where they can ask any “dumb” questions) are responded to. Students are encouraged to eMessage their lecturer as well as begin reflective tasks in their Journals, take part in quizzes to test their understanding (though again outcomes are not kept) and confirm they can access the linked websites, online texts, PDFs and videos. This ensures all technical ability gaps are addressed before their first real course begins. Their participation on the discussion forums ensures they have experienced the initial stages of joining an online community.

The final task, after submitting and receiving back their assessment with feedback, is to complete the online evaluation of the “course”. The data from six months of those evaluations are presented below.

The course evaluations

The questions in the evaluation ask students to report via a Likert Scale based survey on the layout and ease of use of the LMS (*NZTC Online*), their confidence levels with the general tools and features, their confidence with submitting their assessments which must come through the LMS and be returned the same way, and most crucially, their understanding of the importance of participating in the discussion forums, where they can contribute to an online learning community in support of their studies.

The table below presents the responses of 140 students to those questions on the evaluation tool, which were collected in a six month period stretching over 2012/2013.

Table 1: Student evaluation data

Evaluative statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Combined	Neutral	Disagree
The course has given me a good introduction to <i>NZTC Online</i>	74%	22%	96%	3%	1%
I feel confident navigating around <i>NZTC Online</i>	42%	41%	83%	15%	2%
I feel confident using the tools and features of <i>NZTC Online</i>	45%	41%	86%	11%	3%
I feel confident that I will be able to submit future assessment tasks online	67%	29%	96%	3%	1%
The course has outlined who to contact with either technical or academic inquiries	69%	22%	91%	8%	1%
The course has shown how I can become a more autonomous learner	60%	30%	90%	9%	1%
After this course I will definitely refer to the Academic skills section of <i>NZTC Online</i> for learner support	70%	25%	95%	3%	2%
The course has explained the importance of discussion forums	76%	16%	92%	7%	1%
I feel confident that I will be able to post on the discussion board	78%	20%	98%	1%	1%
The course has explained the benefits of contributing to the discussion board	84%	14%	98%	1%	2%
The course has explained the role of the learning community	78%	19%	97%	1%	2%

Discussion

The data appear to confirm the online orientation course as a valuable and confidence building process for the students' learning journey with the College. The vast majority of students agree or strongly agree that the course has given them a good introduction to the LMS tools and features they will encounter in their studies. As the LMS will serve as their "one stop shop" for the theoretical aspect of their programmes, this suggests that they will be able to access the content and supporting readings they will require to sustain their learning

The data also suggest that the majority of students are aware of who they should ask for assistance for both technical support (the IT Helpdesk has reported a drop of two thirds in calls for assistance over this same period) and academic support if that should be required, however, there is evidence to suggest that the course prepares them to be autonomous learners, as 95% were intending to use the self-help Academic Skills support provided online. The practice assessment seems to have given students confidence that they will have no issues with submitting their real assignments through the system and accessing their feedback and ultimate grade.

More importantly, they appear to have recognized the importance of the interactive nature of their studies and the significance of the discussion forum or online community as a valuable aspect to their success. They have been able to practise posting and responding and the lecturer has been modeling the etiquette and tone expected. The foundations of a community of learning have been laid by asking students to share how they came to be studying early childhood and some of their experiences plus encouraging the students to make their own connections by finding out who is likely to be starting with them on the same courses in the near future and, from the detail in their introductions, who happens to be in their general physical location as well.

The evaluations also collect qualitative data in the form of (anonymous) general comments. Those related to the discussion forum specifically appear to confirm the value of the orientation course to the students in introducing them to the interactive and supportive elements provided.

"I may be able to communicate with various people who I may not even see during my course of study."

"I can independently work on my courses with the advantage of also discussing topics with other students in the discussion forums."

"I feel the greatest advantage for me online studies is sharing experiences from online classmates."

The lack of immediacy (the delay in getting a response in an asynchronous environment) though is also frequently commented upon.

As discussed by Schofield & Sackville (2010), induction or orientation should engage students with activities they feel are meaningful to them and provide conditions where they feel welcome and can share expectations. By participating in the orientation course, students are able to practise the technical skills they will require in their online learning environment and as the format mirrors that of the credit-bearing courses to follow, they are able to experience the process of engaging with both the content that will be provided and with their fellow learners. The students' impressions of the online discussion forums appear to confirm they anticipate that aspect of their courses to be worthwhile and that the activities in the orientation have been useful. One often repeated comment on the forum is that students feel they are in a real classroom with a teacher and fellow students, "We just can't see each other."

Conclusion

The orientation course appears to be successfully preparing students for the demands of their online courses at the College. The timing, just before they embark on their programme of study, is an advantage, plus the course remains available to them while they are studying with the College. They have used most if not all of the LMS tools and features they will encounter and have been directed to the self-access Academic Skills site as well as the people they can call on to support their studies. The activities have fostered early engagement with the content and their fellow students and they have experienced the entire assessment submission and return process. More importantly they have connected with fellow students on their learning journey and laid the foundations of a learning community. Research by Jones (2013) suggests that when students are better prepared for their online experience, this flows over into the long term retention rates in their online courses. This however remains to be seen.

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