Designing online orientations for higher education music students: A proposed framework

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Online orientations can provide university students with helpful introductions to relevant knowledge and skills they will need over the course of their studies. While traditional models of university orientation focus on face-to-face lecture delivery and often depend on individual, time-specified events, the online environment can be used for more interactive and discipline-specific orientation. The adoption of an online orientation approach can further provide students with information accessible in manageable time frames and supportive practical applications. Aligned to research literature, this paper proposes a framework for developing an online orientation program for higher education undergraduate and graduate music students. The framework brings together the design benefits of the online environment in conjunction with literature on effective practices of orientation programs. As such, the framework identifies four components of influence when designing an online orientation: Purpose; Audience; Design construction; and Content topic considerations. Areas for future research are also highlighted.

Keywords: university, orientation, music, online delivery, instructional design, undergraduate, graduate

Introduction

A traditional lecture-style university student orientation often requests students from a particular faculty to attend a day-long series of workshops. These workshops can be overwhelming for students as they receive information about course requirements, university services, upcoming events and conferences, technology information and faculty introductions. Due to a variety of reasons, such traditional orientations may not be effective for students (Hansen, Clark, McCleish & Hogan, 2009). An online orientation, for use by face-to-face or online students, can provide students with needed orientation information in an effective learning model with flexibility of information access. Furthermore, an online orientation can be used to provide support for students to develop basic digital learning and soft skills (e.g., time management) in a low-stakes learning environment. Online orientation models have evidenced increased student retention as well as grade improvement (Jones, 2013). Given these positive outcomes for students completing an online orientation, this paper explores research literature to identify components involved in developing an online orientation with specific alignment to the discipline of music. This could then provide direction for future research on the development of generic and discipline specific higher education orientation programs.

The overall goal of an online orientation for first year undergraduate and graduate music students is to support students with a suite of resources that introduce a range of general and discipline-focussed support services. The orientation should be complimentary to their program, and supportive to their long-term achievement of professional (i.e. future employability) success. It is understood that more in-depth subject-specific library and academic skill workshops and online modules would be offered by the faculty, or department. In general, the creation and content of the orientation would involve input from multiple groups including academics, librarians and students. Together, the input from these groups are the foundation for the development of a student-centred orientation that addresses the proposed framework: 1) Orientation purpose and objectives; 2) Audience; 3) Design construction; and 4) Content topic considerations.

Literature overview

The brevity and restrictions of this paper do not allow the inclusion of all the publications discovered with a full literature survey to inform the development of this proposed framework. A selection of relevant research was selected from this survey to support the proposed framework. The strategies undertaken utilized the key academic online databases including Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, RILM

Abstracts of Music Literature, Music Index, and Google Scholar. Keywords and subjects included broad terms: "first year students", orientation, online pedagogy, university, "higher education" and then more specific to music, although there is little written specifically. Inclusion of elements of online information literacy for music were included as there is more literature in this area and is a key conceptual element of the framework.

Orientation purpose and objectives

There are a variety of forms of orientations that can be created. Knowing the purpose and plan for the specific goal of an orientation becomes key to both success and long-term uptake. Online orientations can support the building of community support networks, digital literacy skills, online learning expectations and self-regulation skills (Author, Date). For the purposes of this context, the orientation will be viewed as a skills development support mechanism for students. Within this orientation model, students will equip themselves for learning music as performers, educators and researchers within the context of an online environment.

Within music conservatories, students gain community networks and self-regulation skills specific to the development of their musical art form. That is, music students perform with other students wherein they develop their community networks. Further, the level at which achievement of music performance requires a considerable amount of self-regulation. Given these unique attributes, an online music student orientation should provide students with opportunities to develop digital literacy skills for generalist and music-based contexts, and articulate online learning expectations.

To design a meaningful online orientation, specific objectives should be identified prior to the development of the actual module and are often associated with the choice of content topics (see below). Each objective should have both a time frame for completion and have relevant ways for demonstrating attainment of that objective. For example, one objective could be: Within a seven-day orientation period, students will be able to actively demonstrate online communication etiquette. Further, overarching objectives should help guide students to: learn to help themselves; develop community support networks; and establish a starting place for student successful learning.

When creating an online orientation for music students, one challenge paramount to the success of student completion is discovering the appropriate and opportune week for student participation. In a study by Taylor, Dunn and Winn (2015), retention rates and grade improvement were a result of an online orientation embedded within "gateway courses" (p. 3). Questions to be considered can include: Should it take place during Orientation Week when students are already enrolled and on campus?; Should it be a hurdle requirement with a particular date of completion?; Should enrolments and platform access be made available so that students who are keen to commence their course, can complete the orientation before arriving to campus? While there are many other questions to be considered regarding timeliness of offering, responses to these three questions will help determine a delivery method specific to the faculty and institutional culture.

Overall, online orientation modules provide an active learning opportunity while encouraging adoption of a positive, proactive learning posture. Such opportunities support students to build confidence. Further, low stakes learning opportunities within online orientations allow students to undertake activities and assessments that can assist their transition into university study (Kift, 2009).

Audience

There is a need for online orientations to be specific for their intended student audiences (Vaill, 2013). Building on this notion, we suggest that the key to ensuring relevance of the proposed program for new music students is consideration of its cohort diversity. For example, the university music student can be categorised in a number of ways. Some backgrounds are similar to academic counterparts in other faculties. However, the backgrounds held by the various instrument/voice performance practices of music students encompasses a full spectrum of knowledge. The nature of music performance practice itself indicates a range of experience with some students commencing university having learnt their musical practice from an early age, while others arrive having only been learning their particular music practice for a few years. These are important considerations for the design and choice of activities used within the orientation itself.

Considering the diversity of student backgrounds, the following factors should be explored when developing an online music orientation:

- Domestic/International students (e.g., training backgrounds, language skills and familiarity with university systems)
- Education backgrounds (e.g., differences in rural versus urban education settings; private versus state school opportunities, etc.)
- Musical pathways (e.g., students' choice of jazz and improvisation, classical music, music theatre, etc.)
- Age of students (e.g., young prodigies, teenagers straight from school, mature age students, etc.)
- Musical knowledge at university entrance (e.g., Depth and knowledge of music history and music theory can be diverse. Consider an option in the orientation program based on skill level.)

Design construction

The design construction of the online orientation can take many routes. The use of collaboration across a faculty network has been found helpful in the development of online orientations (Welch, Cook & West, 2016). Prospective collaborators may include: academic co-ordinators, lecturers, tutors, administrators, librarians, educational technologists, and academic skills staff. These foundation experts should address the ways in which assessment, discipline alignment, technology use, and interaction will be shaped.

Design construction for online orientations has used instruction design models such as the ADDIE model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implement, & Evaluation) used by Jones (2013) or Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as used by Author (Date). Further, Cho (2012) suggests that construction should follows "systematic design and development process in four phases: analysis, design, development, and evaluation" (p. 1053). Each of these phases allows for unique faculty and student attributes to surface and be addressed within the orientation product.

It is also important to note student voice is an integral part for developing a successful online orientation (Cho, 2012). That is, formative feedback and ongoing evaluation from students is a key component of the module development and ongoing delivery (Booth, 2005). This evidenced-based approach further suggests the importance of the student voice providing assistance in building inclusivity and community (Ung & Rossiter, 2018).

Content topics

Content topics in an online orientation should be addressed and aligned in an appropriate manner for the form of learning that students will be using (e.g., blended or online learning), as well as address needed technical skills. Furthermore, content topics are planned to include content and guidance from the areas outlined above and following. Continuous evaluation will be applied, and topics adjusted accordingly to student feedback. In the development of online student orientations, Cho (2012) identified four specific topics of content found within online orientations:

> Online students develop understanding about the nature of online learning; Online students use Blackboard skilfully for their own learning; Online students solve technical issues they may encounter while using Blackboard; and Online students develop self-awareness about learning skills required for online learning (p. 1055).

Building on Cho's research, and further supporting the need to address audience specificity within its design construction, an online orientation by Author (Date) was described by Werklund School of Education (2018) as aligning to four areas: "Familiarize students with online learning tools used in the program; Introduce students to best practices for online learning; Orient students to online learning; Provide students with various supports and resources to assist with learning online within a [faculty] context" (para. 4).

As we look to the specific discipline of music, an integral content topic would be how students locate music resources. This topic is discipline specific and would generally be different than other academic disciplines. "Music students work in a unique landscape of information" (Myers & Ishimura, 2016). They need to understand and source a wider range of resources for their textual and performance-based studies, than the average humanities student. Skills in sourcing books, journals, music scores (relevant scholarly, authentic editions) sound recordings and videos (music performances) – online and paper-based - are required to support

their studies. It is a complex and incredibly rich information environment that the students are entering (Scott, 2016).

An introduction to scholarly, music-specific literacy skills and resources is essential for students in these early days. As identified earlier, students come from diverse backgrounds of music knowledge which suggests content should be carefully developed to bring students up to a standard that will allow them to feel comfortable sourcing materials for their first-year history, music language and performance studies. An important element of this content is that it needs to be available when the student is undertaking assessment tasks later in semester. Library staff utilise relevant frameworks e.g., *University of Melbourne Library Digital and Scholarly Literacy Framework* (2017) with its capabilities around scholarly literacy requirements: searching, evaluation, organisation, creation, and connection. These capabilities support the construction and development of online activities to assist the students in the information management.

Awareness of available academic support resources is essential to the development of a student's portfolio of support tools, which can establish confidence throughout their course that support is at hand when needed. This could include promotion of services for the Library (collections, online subject guides, chat/email/face to face support); Academic Skills (support via online resources and face to face tutorials); counselling services; student advisers (to assist with course advice); careers counselling and other relevant support programs.

Other examples of potential content topics may include the following:

- Online communication etiquette (e.g., exploring university citizenry, how to ask good questions, regular checking of email, appropriate use of texting and social media, etc.)
- Online Learning - what is it and how is it different from face-to-face learning? (e.g., developing student network; proactive student wellness; building community support network, etc.)
- Learning with Technology (e.g., identification of responsible digital citizenship, highlighting tools to be used specific programs, etc.)
- Assessments and Feedback (e.g., Exploration of typical forms of assessment and feedback, etc.)

Components of an online orientation

From the above discussion, the following components form key factors when establishing a student-centred framework on which to base the construction of online orientations and their modules:

- Purpose: Establish clear statement of purpose and aligned objectives required for each module
- Audience: Consider the proposed audience to undertake the module and adjust construction and content accordingly
- Construction: Using the aforementioned factors, consider the appropriate construction approach to ensure relevancy and alignment to relevant learning styles; engaging design and delivery is approached through interactivity, incentives, and support across the modules.
- Content: Align the above factors to position and create content that is relevant, up-to-date, and reflective of the purpose and objectives. Ensuring that the collaborative process of creating the content by the expert staff involved is edited and distilled to ensure key content is focussed.

Together, these components form a framework for developing an online orientation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Components of an Online Orientation

Future research

There are a number of relevant areas to be considered for future research on developing higher education online orientations. Overall, researchers should take up studies to address the design of the orientations themselves, and the learning outputs that may result. Within these two areas, there are various stakeholder perspectives that should be considered to provide both and breadth and depth to the research.

More specifically, future research could explore the idea of mandatory orientations. For example, research on orientations may include investigation of music students being "time poor" as a result of long hours for performance, rehearsal, and practice commitments. Further demands may include building friendships and socialising, studying, practicing, working, and travelling as prioritized by each individual student. Therefore, developing orientations as a hurdle requirement may provide a more successful outcome. However, such assessment governance would require further administration and possible time delays. Research questions could examine: To what extent should online orientations be mandatory?; If an online orientation is not mandatory, will students undertake the program?

Other research questions may pertain to activities and application of the orientations themselves. Such inquiry may ask questions such as: What are appropriate activities that align with short, low-stakes orientation programs?; To what extent should other components be considered in a framework for developing an online orientation?; and To what extent does an orientation impact future student learning outcomes and attrition? Together, these questions demonstrate the large gap of research yet to be investigated in the field of online orientations.

Conclusion

The use of online orientations and their specificity to a program discipline can be an important initial learning tool for new and incoming students. Specifically, music students new to the online and blended subject formats may find that they are able to identify important community connections and organization approaches for their future studies from a well-designed online orientation. Content would be developed collaboratively with student-driven experience data from current students as well as identified supports from academic, administration, library information literacy skills and academic skills staff. The topic considerations for the online modules are often general, yet provide student with appropriate expectations for their upcoming learning scenarios. While future research is needed to explore the use of online orientations across larger institutional groups, it can be posited that the use of an online orientation can help support student adoption of digital learning skills specific to the student's discipline.

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