Running head: STRATEGIES FOR ORIENTATION

Strategies for Designing

An Orientation for Online Students

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Abstract

CTER, a five-year-old online Master of Education, organizes an orientation for all the new students admitted into the online program every year. This presentation introduces the strategies followed to organize, design, develop, deliver and evaluate the orientation program. The study includes design considerations, explanation of the objectives, details in the development and implementation, and features of the evaluation.

Strategies for Designing an Orientation for Online Students

Introduction

Students that start online classes come with different competencies, learning styles, and communication skills, and with little or no experience in learning or interacting on the Web. It is important that Internet-based distance learning programs provide online tutorials or orientation sessions that aim to facilitate the transition to online learning.

Robinson, Burns and Gaw (1996) emphasize the importance of orientation programs as the base for students' success in college. Although they do not refer specifically to the orientation to online or distance learning programs, their statements and strategies certainly apply to classes delivered to off-campus students via the Internet. They state that "orientation programs facilitate students learning in three dimensions: transition progress, academic integration, and personal and social integration" (p.55). These three dimensions need to be covered in all orientations, but there is a fourth element that is added to the orientation of students who will be taking classes online: "the learner-interface interaction" (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena, 1994, p. 39) "Instructional designers must include learner-interface interactions which enable the learner to have successful interaction with the mediating technology" (McIsaac & Blocher, 1998, p. 44). As Shelton (2000) points out "students need to quickly overcome technological problems. The quicker a student learns the interface, the quicker a student can concentrate on the course content" (p.4).

Receiving instruction via the Internet, and being part of an online learning community, is something new to many students starting Internet-based distance-learning programs (Scagnoli, 2001) Curriculum, Technology and Education Reform (CTER), the five-years-old online Master of Education program at the College of Education in the University of Illinois, has made provisions to have new online students academically involved and self-confident in this virtual

educational environment where they will build up their learning experience. The CTER orientation program takes place just before the beginning of classes and all students admitted in the program are required to participate. CTER uses a combined methodology for the orientation that includes online and face-to-face activities.

This presentation introduces the strategies followed to organize, design, develop, deliver and evaluate the orientation program at CTER.

Description

The strategies for conducting orientation programs include different methodologies and timeframes. The orientation activities can be offered prior to the beginning of classes (Robinson et al., 1996); two weeks before the first course (Kuchinke, Aragon & Bartlett, 2001); or half an hour before the first session of any distance education course (Bergman & Raleigh, 1998). "Orientation sessions can be conducted remotely, face-to-face, or both" (Scagnoli, 2000, p.20). They include activities that can be completed totally online, as the 'boot-camp' online orientation used in Boise State (Carnevale, 2000), and which are common in online programs that have students from far away locations. When "travel costs, use of leave entitlements and personal arrangements all contribute to the difficulty of attending an on-campus orientation" (Bowser & Race, 1992). Or they can include activities that are completed in an on-campus visit. Such is the case of programs offered to learners who live in the same state or at a short distance from the college campus, orientation takes place in a face-to-face meeting (Scagnoli, 2000).

New students admitted to the CTER program receive orientation delivered in 2 phases:

Online activities that start 4 weeks before classes and are completed before students come to campus.

Face-to-face session that takes place on campus 2 days before classes.

Initial design consideration and assessment

Design considerations include the identification of the objectives of the orientation and determining "how much of the program will be devoted to addressing institutional matters and how much will be allocated to student identified issues" (Bowser & Race, 1992, p.3). Two things are important: "integrating students into the social fabric of the institution is key to their retention and success" (Tinto, 1987, as cited in Robinson et al. 1996, p.55); as well as attending participants' expectations of the program and perceived needs (Robinson et al., 1996, p.65). In online programs the participants' needs also include making sure that students' technological skills are at the appropriate level in order to access and interact with class materials.

To facilitate academic and social interactions, learners have to be confident of the new medium where they will interact as graduate students. Class work is the main activity in which students will be involved, but taking part of a degree program involves other activities that include dealing with administrative and social interactions. When students are admitted into an on-campus degree program, they receive an orientation session that "helps to become familiar with the campus and learn about campus support services" (Robinson et al., 1996). Students are provided with orientation materials, contact numbers, and directions to offices where they can get help in matters such as getting an e-mail address, signing up for classes, checking out books, transferring classes, and others. They also receive a campus map which helps them find the buildings and offices where they have to go. Online students do not necessarily need the map, but they do need the support and services as much as they need access to the class materials.

The orientation has to provide learners with skills to access and participate in learning events, but also, and very importantly, they need to have an understanding of how to deal with

administrative matters and how to communicate with different college units that will help them in other academic related issues.

In CTER , preparations for the orientation start 16 weeks before the orientation date. The first step in the design of the orientation is conducting a needs assessment based on the results of the previous year's orientation. Data is collected from: a) student surveys completed at the end of previous orientations; b) faculty and staff input; c)technical support communication logs; d) surveys completed by new students when they receive the notification of admission to the program; and e) other documentation gathered during orientation sessions in previous years. The analysis of this data provides information that will be used in the design of the new orientation program.

Goal of the Orientation Program

The goals of off-campus students orientation may vary according to the nature of the degree program, but it is agreed that objectives have to include: a) provisions to help students develop a sense of belonging to the institution; b) develop the students' understanding of the mode of learning (Browser & Race, 1992); c) become familiar with students support services (Browser & Race, 1992; Robinson et al., 1996); d) foster social networking and community-building activities (Robinson et al., 1996); e) facilitate the adjustment to the academic environment (Robinson et al., 1996); and f) increase students' comfort level with the equipment by means of activities that help them to become proficient with the use of hardware and software required (Bergman & Raleigh, 1998**;** Kuchinke et al., 2001).

CTER aims to develop and deliver an effective orientation program that:

1. Introduces the tools and applications that will be used in the masters program

2. Explains the university policies and procedures that students will have to work with to use their time efficiently in dealing with administrative matters.

3. Fosters students' involvement in the online educational community that they will be part of as graduate students.

The objectives explained.

The first objective "Introduce tools and applications that will be used in the program", responds to the need of having all students using the same applications and same versions of the applications when they access the course material. Previous experiences have demonstrated that there are less technical support requests when the applications are delivered to students and it is not up to them to download those from the Internet. "Since the Web allows students to become more independent learners and true distance education participants, it is important for students to quickly overcome technological problems" (Shelton, 2000, p.4). To avoid frustration dealing with technology when taking classes, CTER produces a CD-ROM with the required software and applications that is mailed to students 6 weeks before classes start. The software included in the CD-ROM is available free over the Internet (shareware) or through university licensing agreements. The online sessions of the orientation include activities that train students on how to use this software.

As Robinson et al. (1996) state "Information helps to reduce stress due to uncertainty and fosters an active problem solving style" (p.56), the second objective of the orientation program aims to provide information. "Explain the university policies and procedures that students will have to work with to use their time efficiently in dealing with administrative matters", intends to let students know who to contact for different academic needs. For example, if students need to apply for financial aid, or check a book out of the library, or request a transfer, they have to

know the contact information, such as e-mail of the person or office that will help with those issues. Lack of information causes students to send all their requests to CTER staff and get their messages forwarded to the corresponding person, resulting in a waste of precious time and frustration for the student. To update students with this information in the orientation program, CTER has created documentation that explains and links to the web sites of the university units that provide the administrative services and support that students frequently require. Also, CTER invites departmental and Academic Outreach staff to participate in the face-to-face session of the orientation, so that students can meet the people in charge of student services and receive information regarding regular administrative procedures.

The third objective: "Get the students involved in the online educational community that they will be part of in the next two years" initiates students to effective ways of interacting in a virtual community of learners, is in agreement with Robinson et al. (1996) statement "orientation must also address students' adjustment to the social environment" (p.58). Most students have never experienced relating to others via the Internet or participating in a class without being face-to-face with the professor or their classmates. The orientation aims to help students develop skills to communicate via the Internet synchronously and asynchronously with faculty, peers and technical support or college staff. Activities that encourage communication that begins with a face-to-face meeting has proven to be successful in getting students to know each other and promotes a sense of belonging to the group. Both phases of CTER orientation include activities that encourage social interaction. Phase one, the online orientation session, involves online activities that promote students introductions and communication in synchronous and asynchronous sessions, such as posting in the discussion forum a short introductory paragraph that describes themselves, or chatting with technical support in response to technical questions.

For the face-to-face session, CTER organizes informal gatherings such as group lunches or a picnic to support the social interaction between participants of the program that include CTER staff, faculty and newly admitted students.

Design and Development

   Resources.

   One of the common characteristics of successful orientation programs indicated by Robinson et al. (1996) is the "total campus commitment". Emphasizing the fact that a "spirit of campus cooperation and commitment to students' learning and professional development projects a strong sense of campus as a learning community to incoming students" (p. 61). In CTER the orientation process for online students is possible thanks to the participation and collaboration of all stakeholders. CTER staff and technical support members constitute the core team involved in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of the orientation. CTER faculty, staff and personnel from the College of Education and the Office of Academic Outreach also contribute to the orientation at different stages of the process:

   CTER Faculty participate in the needs assessment, and in the implementation of the
   orientation. At the needs assessment and design stages, the faculty are asked to provide
   information about the methodology they will be using in their class, and if they will be using
   a new software application that would require student training. The information is included in
   the orientation design.

   The CTER staff is composed by a director, a full time coordinator, two half time web
   developer and programmers, and a half time evaluator. This core team that designs, develops
   and implements the orientation. They play different roles in the orientation team:

     i) Project Manager: This role is played by the coordinator. The responsibilities include the overall planning, design, control and general management of the project.

     ii) Web Developers /Programmers(2): Technical support staff fulfills this role. Their responsibilities are the design and development of the online phase of the orientation and the creation of any multimedia material that will be included in the orientation

     iii) Researcher / Editor/ Evaluator: This is fulfilled by a half time research assistant and the CTER director and CTER coordinator. They do the editing and proofreading of all the orientation documentation that will be printed and published online. They also create surveys, summarize data, alert support staff when changes are necessary and publish articles in academic journals.

Department staff. The clerical staff of the department of Educational Psychology are also consulted during the needs assessment session of the orientation. Because they are in charge of all formal communication with candidates, they assist in the completion of forms and respond to inquires about college and university requirements for admission into the program, they provide useful information that is used in the design of the orientation.

1) Academic Outreach staff: Once the student is admitted to the graduate program, this office is in charge of communicating with the students about course registration and providing other services and support such as financial aid and access to the library. The personnel at Academic Outreach also participate in the needs assessment of the orientation, by providing information about policies and procedures for off-campus students.

Table 1 shows the human resources involved in the orientation process , the role they play and at what stages they participate.

Who	Roles	Design	Development	Implementation	
				Online	F2f
CTER faculty		XX		XX	XX
(CTER staff)	Project manager	XX	XX	XX	XX
	Web Developers/ programmer	XX	XX		
	Researcher/Editor/ Evaluator		XX		XX
	Technical Support			XX	XX
College/ Department staff	Resource of information	XX			XX
Academic Outreach				XX	XX

Table 1: Roles and stages of participation of human resources in the orientation process

Implementation

"For students to become comfortable with the equipment they need to know what it is and how it works " (Bergman & Raleigh, 1998, p.62). The delivery of the orientation materials and implementation of the orientation program starts six weeks before classes. Students are mailed a printed manual and a CD-ROM that, together with a series of online activities, comprise the online phase of the orientation program. These activities include exercises that involve the use and application of software employed in online classes, as well as techniques to practice

communication skills in synchronous and asynchronous formats. The activities have to be completed gradually and they consist of the following:

i) Accessing new campus e-mail accounts,

ii) Sending and receiving e-mail and using attachments.

iii) Downloading and uploading files from the web

iv) Using discussion/communication forums (WebBoard, Tapped In)

v) Creating Web Pages

vi) Using applications for synchronous communication (AOL, Tapped In, WebBoard)

vii) Installing multimedia plug-ins and running the different applications that are required for those plug-ins.

viii)   Downloading and running updates to software and operating systems.

Students' completion of each activity is monitored by the CTER technical support staff involved in the orientation. Students receive feedback from the staff as they proceed through the activities.

This interaction between the students and the support staff provides information about the technology skill level of the students and gives the support staff an idea of how students feel about working in an online environment. This allows the staff to make provisions about further practice of certain items when students come to campus for the face-to-face session.

The face-to-face session of the orientation consists of a two-day meeting with the following activities:

i) Starting session where students introduce themselves and meet CTER faculty, technical support, staff and alumni

ii) Participating in an 'ice-breaking' activity

iii) Socializing and posing for pictures that will be included in the new cohort web page.

iv) Taking part in a picnic hosted by a member of the CTER faculty.

v) Meeting the Dean of the College and staff from the Department of Educational
   Psychology, the Office of Academic Outreach, the Office of Financial Aid and the
   Academic Outreach library.

vi) Opening session of the first online course

vii) Completing orientation survey

viii)   Providing additional technology training or troubleshoot technical difficulties if
   needed.

All these activities included in the face-to-face session of the orientation foster an
atmosphere of camaraderie, personal-social integration, and community-building.
According to Astin (1993), student interaction with peers and faculty is an important
factor in student retention. Students who feel connected to their peers and the campus
community are more likely to persist to graduation.

Timeline.

In 16 weeks the orientation is designed, developed and delivered. Figure 1 shows the
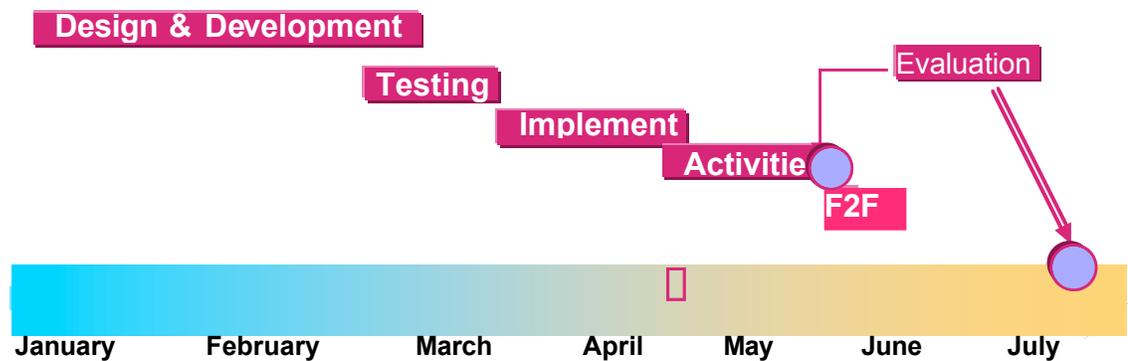distribution of stages in a timeline for the orientation.

Design & Development

Testing

Implement

Activitie

F2F

Evaluation

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| January | February | March | April | May | June | July |

Figure 1: Timeline of stages in design, development, delivery and evaluation of
orientation

Communication.

A communication plan is established between the members of the team, to keep
everybody updated on the status of the project. The communication pattern has different formats,
depending on what type of communication and to what audiences.

 The team that prepares the orientation meets once a week and they maintain open
communication in person, via e-mail and chat. CTER staff and faculty are informed of the
process in weekly and monthly meetings. The end of each stage constitutes a milestone, and an
evaluation of the process is carried out by the project manager to assess the status of the project.

Communication with students participating in the orientation is done via e-mail,
telephone, or online chat. It is important that students know how to contact the program when
something goes wrong in the orientation process. Several options for communication are also
important; an 800-number, a regular telephone number, e-mail addresses and a web page are
some of the options that they can use to contact faculty and staff in the CTER program. To
encourage communication between students, they receive a list with names and e-mail address of
those admitted into the program and also participating of the orientation.

Evaluation.

Evaluation of the orientation includes an evaluation of the orientation materials, evaluation of the orientation process, and evaluation of the effectiveness of the orientation once it is completed.

Evaluation of the orientation materials is completed before the materials are mailed to students. It includes an evaluation of all the products delivered in the orientation: the printed manual, the CD-ROM and the Web activities. The printed materials are edited and proof-read by a member of CTER staff and faculty before they are sent to printing. Beta versions of the CD-ROM and web pages are tested in different platforms and operating systems to make sure that they operate equally in several computer systems before they are burnt and mailed to students.

Progress evaluation takes place during the implementation of the orientation. Team members monitor that all activities are performed on scheduled and as required. Students that experience unexpected technical problems receive help from the technical support staff, and in certain cases, they are scheduled to receive extra support when they come to the face-to-face session.

Final evaluation: Participants of the orientation complete a survey right after the orientation is finished. The results of this survey are analyzed and the data is used for future orientations. The survey includes questions that focus on students' satisfaction with the orientation materials and the process of the face-to-face and online phases of the orientation. It also assesses the students' comfort with the technical support services provided during the orientation, with the information they have received about the program, with the institution's policies and procedures; with the students' perceptions of the online program, and their expectations. As Robinson et al. (1996) indicate, the reviews that result in the evaluation allow

all, (organizers and participants) to process their experiences and to modify the program for future use.

Conclusion

The orientation for students taking classes online has to help removing as many technological barriers as possible prior to the beginning of a program to ensure a successful start, and to avoid the dissatisfaction and frustration that results in few students being able to meet the course schedule (Kuchinke et al., 2001).

An orientation program for students that take part in an online program has to involve more than one agent and needs thorough planning, and execution. Strategic elements in the design of the orientation have to include: (a) emphasis on team work, (b) attainable goals and objectives, (c) clear roles and stages for participation that allow the intervention of the campus community that takes part in the student life , (d) activities that encourage familiarity and comfort with the learning environment, (e) actions that foster community-building by supporting student interaction with their peers, faculty and members of the online community.

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