

Student Orientations for Online Programs

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Abstract

Traditionally, higher education institutions have developed orientation programs that are designed to help students make a successful transition to college. Now, considering this flow of virtual students, universities offering distance learning programs have to design orientation programs suited for the students that will take distance courses. This article introduces the issues to be considered in designing an orientation for students in online programs and presents the strategies being used currently in some Internet-based courses. Orientation for online courses serve the same objectives as orientation for college, in the sense that it can facilitate academic and social interactions, increase student involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community, and help retention. (Keywords: distance education, Internet-based learning, online courses, orientation, student orientation.)

The changes and advances in telecommunication technologies are transforming people's needs for education and training, as well as expanding people's capacities to respond to these needs (American Council on Education, 1996). Internet-based distance learning, emerging as part of mainstream education and training efforts, is giving people the opportunity to earn a degree without compelling them to move near a college campus and leave their jobs and families.

ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION

Online instruction, as the fastest growing field in distance education, is making use of the Internet and other communication technologies to reach widespread audiences of distance learners. Universities embrace this new trend and adopt this medium to offer their traditional distance courses or to promote new programs or courses. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1999) has recently released a report that shows a 72% increase in the number of distance learning programs in the United States between 1995 and 1998 and foresees a potential 20% growth in the next three years.

This transformation and growth in "technology-mediated distance learning" (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2000) has brought about changes in the roles of the higher education institutions, their programs, faculty, and students. Distance learners that pursue degrees are grouped in virtual classes and become part of the university "virtual campus." Receiving instruction on the Internet and being part of a cohort are something new to most online students starting distance learning programs. Because of this, universities need to create a virtual education environment that engages new online students academically while building their self-confidence.

ORIENTATION FOR ONLINE STUDENTS

Traditionally, higher education institutions have developed orientation programs that are designed to help students make a successful transition to college. Considering the increase in the number of remote learners, universities offering distance learning programs must now design orientation programs suited for the students who will take courses at a distance. Orientation for online courses serve the same objectives as orientation for college, in that it can facilitate academic and social interactions, increase students involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community, and help retention (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996).

Some online programs have tried to make this startup easy to avoid delays or frustrations that may be caused by inexperience with the new media used for instruction. Orientation or tutorials that will put all students on a common ground before the program starts have been offered face-to-face and at a distance. In some institutions this orientation is called “boot camp” (Carnevale, 2000). IHEP (2000) reports that practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course are among the “Benchmarks that are essential for quality Internet-based education” (p. 25).

DESIGNING ORIENTATION FOR ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING

Orientation sessions can be conducted remotely, face-to-face, or both. The Internet-based master’s programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign are used as examples of remote and face-to-face orientation in this article.

Successful orientation programs should provide learning experiences that help students understand and make adaptations to change (Robinson et al., 1996). Certain considerations about these programs need to be addressed to determine the instructional design and the kind of orientation process that will be conducted. The following is a list of questions proposed to help in this design.

- *The program:* In order to increase their involvement and eventually lessen the drop out rate, is it necessary that students learn more about the program during an orientation period?
- *The courses:* How helpful is it for the success of the program that students know about the way each course will be organized and how the professor will evaluate, teach, and communicate?
- *The technological applications used in the program:* Shall the prerequisites to the program include some basic technological skills? To what extent should these skills match the ones that will be used in the program?
- *The social interaction in the virtual learning environment:* How important for the success of the program is it that all students become familiar with the other students’ backgrounds or interests before they start the program? How can this familiarity affect the cohort/group formation?
- *Students’ location/background:* Where are the students geographically located? Are there cultural issues to be considered in an orientation?

- *Instructors for the orientation:* Who will prepare, organize, teach, and/or be in charge of the orientation: the instructors of the first courses, the coordinator of the online program, and/or the college?

The answers to these questions will help determine the content and media used for the orientation.

The Program

Contrary to NCES (1999) reports, many colleges have already adopted online formats for distance courses. The instructional media, however, is new. In the case of existing programs that have been “moved” online, there is no need for further explanation because information about these programs is readily available before or at the moment of enrollment. When programs are new to a college, or when a program has not been previously taught in a face-to-face format, students will generally require additional orientation information.

At the University of Illinois Online, for example, printed information is mailed to students enrolled in both master’s programs in education, Curriculum, Technology, and Educational Reform (CTER) and Human Resources Education (HRE) Online. This printed material is also found online, in the Web sites for the programs HRE Online (www.hre.uiuc.edu/online), online master’s in library and information sciences (LEEP, <http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/gslis/degrees/leep.html>), and CTER (www.ed.uiuc.edu/cter). Students interested in finding out about these programs have access to e-mail addresses of program coordinators and staff. A toll-free number is also available for support. This information is provided to help reduce orientation stress and uncertainty.

The Courses

Students need to develop realistic expectations of the type of work that will be required (Robinson et al., 1996). Not all instructors offering online courses will have experience in the new media used and/or in distance learning teaching. Orientation time can help instructors experience the role of conducting a virtual class. Usually this involves instructors changing their teaching practices as Breivik (1998) says—when he refers to challenges for faculty—“making a change . . . means evolving from being good teachers to being good facilitators of learning” (p. 79). Even when instructors have experience with online teaching, they should provide new students with a summary of the applications they will be using during the course as well as a list of their general course requirements. Instructor expectations can be made clear at the beginning of the course as part of an introduction within the course curriculum. Or if the instructors have agreed on a certain type of instructional design or course organization, the orientation may be a good opportunity to make this known to the users.

The Applications

It is important that during the orientation, all students become familiar with the instructional media used in the courses. This is key to ensuring a smooth start. Specifically, methods and communication tools used to deliver the courses

must be introduced during an orientation. Students worried about communicating with an instructor or worried about downloading appropriate materials will experience frustration and ultimately drop from the course.

Both CTER and HRE Online offer a set of online tutorials that help in the installation and usage of the technological applications that will be necessary in the development of the courses. Before classes begin, students enrolled in these programs receive a CD-ROM containing the applications and the tutorials for installation and use of the applications they will be using in the course. This ensures that all students will have the same versions of applications needed for the course at the time they start, avoiding delays in the download of the application via modem, or different versions of the software. Students will also be able to install and use them. If they encounter some difficulty in this process, a tech support group will be there to walk students through these steps as part of the orientation.

An effective design of this orientation in the uses of applications would be crucial to the success of the virtual learning experience because this will set up the basis for the student's confidence in the use of the internet for learning and instructions or helping tutorials that add confusion to the process will certainly not help. Having online training tutorials, or face-to-face workshops on the use of course applications, helps increase the student's self-confidence regarding the tools to be used in the course.

The Social Interaction in the Virtual Learning Environment

Within electronic environments, the dimensions of the social interactions that mediate learning are undoubtedly increasing in complexity (Dowling, 1999). When most courses in a program demand group work or group discussion, students should be encouraged to find their group-mates in the orientation. This will save time during the course and allow them to get acquainted outside the course. Communication outside the course means that students will gain experience using communication tools. That is to say that, if students are going to be part of a group, they should be encouraged to become familiar with the communication tools so that they can introduce themselves and begin to learn from one another. HRE Online uses the time allotted to orientation to make students use the communication tools to share selected professional and personal information with the program coordinator and technical support personnel. A synchronous chat space is scheduled prior to the beginning of the semester to make sure that all students learn how to use synchronous and asynchronous telecommunication technologies. These activities increase students' social interaction in the virtual learning community and contribute to foster a collaborative learning environment that will be part of the group interactions in the development of the courses (Riel, 1999). The inclusion of different social activities in the face-to-face orientation meetings will also help people get acquainted and form their working teams.

Meeting new people and communicating effectively are important personal and professional learning experiences that contribute to the distance learners' academic adjustment, feeling of connection and commitment to the program,

and the provision of an important support system (Robinson et al., 1996). The orientation organized by CTER prior to the summer 1998 and fall 1999 semesters incorporated several exercises to offer students an opportunity to meet and interact with others, students, coordinators, technical support, and faculty who will be part of the virtual classroom in their career.

Student's Location/Background

Community building is an important aspect of many orientation programs. Students who feel connected to other students and campus community are more likely to persist to graduation (Astin, 1993). The social networking that starts in an orientation will probably last longer than the program. The technology used in the program will be the tool that keeps communication between peers or colleagues alive.

In the case of programs that are offered internationally, orientation must be designed not only to help students deal with new technology, but with a diversity of students and cultures as well. Specific issues of cultural sensitivity must be addressed so that students are not offended, either intentionally or unintentionally, by certain online behavior.

Programs offered within a state or nearby states can organize the orientation as a face-to-face encounter. This may become an excellent opportunity to address all the issues mentioned above, plus those related to getting students more acquainted with the instructors and program staff. Orientation is a good opportunity to start a persistent educational virtual environment that can help the development of collaborative projects between members of different geographical communities (Bouras, Lampsas, Bazaios, & Tsintilas, 1998).

Electronic discussion is unique in that people communicate mostly through text, without many of the social and contextual cues that usually regulate and influence group dynamics. Experimental studies of electronic interaction have shown that people can work collaboratively in computer-mediated groups. Paradoxically, this lack of social and individual cues can make people feel more comfortable working within a group than in his or her own culture, where issues such as gender, age, or social background could influence or impede team work (Kiesler, 1992).

Instructors and/or Coordinators

An ideal orientation would be one that brings together the coordinator of the online course, the program instructors, especially those teaching the initial courses, and the technical support team. This kind of collaborative effort would be a good demonstration of campus cooperation and commitment to student learning and professional development projects. Even in the case of remote orientation, the participation of faculty in the orientation is a demonstration of involvement in the program that can be certainly appreciated by students. Because most current faculty members received their degrees prior to the information and technology explosion, many have little or no training in the use of new information technologies (Breivik, 1998). Orientation is a good learning opportunity for these instructors. It can provide them with an oppor-

tunity to introduce their courses and the technological applications they will be using in their classes.

STRATEGIES USED IN ORIENTATIONS

Orientation activities can be offered at any time between the enrollment process and the beginning of classes. The format of such activities include face-to-face, remote, or combined methods. The programs can vary in length from one day to two or three weeks.

Face-to-Face Orientation

Face-to-face orientation for a distance learning course may be unusual, but it is quite effective in helping groups become familiar with the methods of distance learning instruction, group formation, and technical troubleshooting. The technological level of students is easily determined by having them practice with the applications they will be using in class. This can help instructors and technical support learn how easily the members of a cohort use some applications. This immediate feedback is very important because it provides clues on what things need to be improved before the course starts or what things will require additional tutorial help during the course.

Face-to-face orientation can take hours, days, or even weeks to complete. Long-term orientation usually includes several types of activities involving one or more workshops, social activities aimed at team formation, and course introductions.

Like orientation activities in general, this program increases students' persistence in the course because its highly interactive, small group format enables students to obtain support from each other and from the instructors and program coordinators (Fidler, 1991).

CTER and LEEP, two of the University of Illinois online master's programs, offer this face-to-face methodology to students starting the program each fall. The technological applications are introduced in workshops conducted by the program coordinator or people in the technical support team. LEEP makes this face-to-face orientation within a 12-day on-campus summer stay, during which students also complete a half-unit required course and participate in special events like picnics, presentations, and others where they meet professors, information professionals, and future classmates.

CTER organizes a two- to three-day campus stay that is meant exclusively for the orientation process. In this stay, students also participate in short "on-hands technological experiences," social activities organized to build a community among the students in a cohort, and introduction to first semester courses. Instructors of required courses in the program are invited to participate and use some time in the orientation to interact with the students, introduce their course and teaching methodology, and encourage team formation if the class activities will involve group work.

Online Orientation

The process of orientation can also be carried on remotely. This provides a kind of Internet-based training for the program itself. The presence of a “help desk” or “live help” will be very necessary, because students will be asking their questions in the process. This type of remote orientation usually takes place when the orientation focuses on the uses and familiarity with the technological applications that will be applied in the program. Students’ questions will be largely related to the technological arena; hence, the coordinator of the program together with some technical support will play the most important part in this orientation. Instructors do not play a key role in this preliminary process; they appear “on stage” only when classes start.

Remote orientation can take the shape of a tutorial and be delivered online, or on a CD-ROM, where the tutorial for the technological applications and other items of information will be included. Students are encouraged to use the tools included in this orientation so that they can ask questions and solve problems before the classes start. The use of these tools involves the use of Web communication or whatever method has been pointed to be used for that purpose. This communication tool is used to make students socialize, know each other, and share some information to form work groups. This remote orientation process is welcomed by those who start up a distance learning program from different and remote geographical locations where having a face-to-face orientation is impossible.

HRE Online uses this remote methodology for the orientation process. The orientation includes a “New Student Technology Orientation and Setup” Web site, where students follow steps to complete seven activities in order to ensure the correct configuration and installation of the software and hardware. These activities are also meant to provide an introduction to the program environment. As part of the technology-mediated activities, students interact with their future classmates, technical support staff, and some of the faculty in the HRE Online courses. This interaction is conducted using the communication technology applications used during the courses in the master’s program. These applications include the uses of e-mail, synchronous chats, and electronic discussion boards.

Combined Methodology for Orientation

When a face-to-face orientation program is possible for the members of a cohort, it has to be brief, because students cannot spend more than a day at one location. A good orientation can make use of both online and face-to-face methods to create a successful starting point for the new students.

Online and face-to-face orientation can complement each other in an orientation program that focuses on three relevant areas: training in technological skills, group/team formation, and course information. If students receive a tutorial introducing the technological applications that will be used in the course and practice with those before the face-to-face meeting, this meeting can be helpful for troubleshooting particular problems or applications. Students can

begin getting to know each other online before meeting face-to-face. This can help them quickly form work groups when they do meet. Face-to-face orientations can be used for troubleshooting; introducing instructors, coordinators, or technical support; and group formation.

CONCLUSION

Internet-based distance education programs gather diverse group of students from different backgrounds. These students have found ways to work beyond the barrier of distance from a college campus that might have previously prevented them from continuing their education. These students can find their common ground through virtual communities set up for them. Emphasizing the importance of this process will facilitate students' transition. Clearly, traditional and modern elements of education merge in this new technology-mediated learning experience. ■

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