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Students orientation for online programs

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 courses at a distance. This paper introduces the issues to be considered in designing an orientation for students in online programs and presents the strategies being used at present 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 students involvement, enhance the sense of belonging to a virtual learning community and help retention.

Introduction

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 get 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 media to offer their

traditional distance courses, or to promote new programs or courses. The U.S. Department of Education has recently released a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which shows that between 1995 and 1998 there was an increase of 72 percent in the number of distance learning programs in the U.S., and foresees a 20 percent growth in the next three years (NCES, 1999).

This transformation and growth in “technology-mediated distance learning” (IHEP, 2000) 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 via the Internet, and being part of a cohort, is something new to most online students starting distance-learning programs. Universities have to make provisions to have new online students academically involved and self confident in this virtual educational environment where they will build up their learning experience.

Orientation to online students

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 courses at a distance. Orientation for online courses serve the same objectives as orientation for college, in the sense 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, D., Burns, C. Gaw, K., 1996).

Some online programs have tried to make this startup easy and helpful 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 or at a distance. In some institutions this orientation is called “boot camp”, relating to military training. The recent document “Benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education” (IHEP, 2000) reports that the practice sessions prior to the beginning of the course are among the “Benchmarks that are essential for quality Internet-based education.”

Designing orientation for online distance learning:

Orientations can be carried on remotely, face to face, or both. In any case the focus may be different. The Internet-based Master's programs in Human Resource Education, the LEEP, -Master degree offered by the Graduate School of Library and Information Science; and the Curriculum, Technology and Education Reform (CTER) in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign are used as examples of remote and face-to-face orientation in this study.

There are some elements that have to be considered to succeed in leading an orientation that will facilitate the transition to the new learning environment and reduce the stress that is usually evident in new adjustments. Successful orientation programs should provide learning experiences that help students understand and make adaptations to change (Robinson et al, 1996). Considerations about the program, the courses, the technological applications, the social interaction in the virtual environment, the students location and background, and the instructional designers for the orientation have to be addressed to determine the instructional design and the kind of orientation process that will be carried on. The following is a list of questions proposed to help in this design.

1. The program– is it necessary that students learn more about the program during an orientation period that will increase their involvement and eventually lessen the drop out rate?
2. The courses – How helpful is it for the success of the program that students know about the way each course will be organized, the criteria the professor will use to evaluate, teach, communicate, keep the class communicated?
3. The technological applications used in the program – Shall the pre-requisites to the program include some basic technological skills? To what extent should these skills match the ones that will be used in the program?
4. 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?

5. Students' location/background – where are the students geographically located? Are there cultural issues to be considered in an orientation?
6. Instructors for the orientation –who will prepare/organize/teach/be in charge of the orientation: the instructors of the first courses/ the coordinator of the online program/ the college?

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

1. **The program:** Some programs are not new to colleges as the National Center for Education Statistics reports many of the colleges that adopted online formats for courses, already offered distance courses (NCES, 1998), but the instructional media are new. In the case of existing programs that were “moved” online, there is enough information about the program itself that can be collected from different sources, and this information is available before or at the moment of enrolling in a program, so there is no need for further explanation, and a list of FAQs can help new students. But in other cases, such as the Master's in the Curriculum, Technology and Educational Reform (CTER) program, the whole project is new to the college and some of the courses have not been taught in a face-to-face format. In these cases, students do not have many sources of information for the program itself and though they may receive a good deal of material about the course, there may still be questions or concerns that may come up in an orientation. In the examples that we are considering here, the University of Illinois Online sends by mail complete printed information to the enrolled students in both Master's programs in Education, CTER and HRE Online. This printed material is also found online, in the websites for the programs HREOnline (<http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/hre>), LEEP (<http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/leep3/>) and CTER (<http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/cter>). Besides prospective students have access to e-mail addresses of program coordinators and staff and also to a toll free number (1-800) for support. As in all new adjustments, the information that is provided before the starting of the program will help to reduce the stress due to uncertainty.
2. **The courses:** Students need to develop realistic expectations of the type of work that will be required (Robinson et al, 1996). Not all instructors who will offer online

courses in the program may have experience in the new media used and/or in distance learning teaching. So this orientation time can also help them to experience the role of conducting a virtual class. Usually this involves instructors changing their teaching practices as Breivik (1998) says, “to become from good teachers to good facilitators of learning”. Even when they do have experience in online teaching, it is a good idea that they make clear to the new group of students some general premises that should be taken into account, or what applications the instructor will be using. These concerns 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 in a certain type of instructional design or course organization, the orientation may be a good opportunity to make this known to the users.

3. **The applications:** The method that will be used to deliver the courses or the communication tools that will be used during the program are things that have to be introduced or learned during an orientation. It is important that during the orientation all students become familiar with the instructional media used in the courses. This seems to be a key factor to a smooth start. Students who are too worried about how to communicate with the instructor using the assigned tools, worried about the downloading of an application, links not working, etc can suffer a bad experience that generates frustration and may lead them to drop 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. The students enrolled in these programs receive prior to the beginning of classes a CD-ROM with applications to be downloaded to the computers they will be using in the course. This reduces download times via modem, and it also allows all students have the same software required for the Internet-based courses. In this way the tutorials for the applications are addressed to the use of specific applications that all students have and will be using in the course.

An effective design of this orientation in the uses of applications would be crucial to the success of the virtual learning experience. Having online training tutorials, or face-to-face workshops on the use of several applications, helps to increase the

student's self-confidence in the uses of the tools that will be used in the course delivery.

4. **The social interaction in the virtual learning environment:** Within electronic environments, the dimensions of the social interactions, which mediate learning, are undoubtedly increasing in complexity (Dowling, 1999). When most courses in a program will demand group work or group discussion, it is a positive thing to consider encouraging students to find their group-mates in the orientation. This will save time during the course and will allow them get acquainted out of the grounds of the course, which will also mean practice with the communication tools. That is to say, that if they are going to be part of a group, it may be a good idea to encourage them to use the communication tool before the course to learn from each other, so they become familiar with the tool and with the class mate at the same time. HRE Online uses the time allotted to orientation to make students use the communication tools to deliver professional and personal information they want to share to the program coordinator and technical support. Even 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 also lead to 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).

Also the inclusion of different social activities in the face-to face orientation meeting will make people get acquainted and make up working teams. The orientation organized by CTER prior to Summer'98 and Fall'99 semesters incorporated several exercises to offer students an opportunity to meet and interact with others, students, coordinators, technical support, and faculty - that will be part of the virtual classroom in their career. 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).

5. **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, and the technology used in the program will be the tool to keep the communication between peers or colleagues alive. In the case of programs that are offered internationally, a good idea is to look into an orientation that will not only prepare the students to deal with the technology involved in the course, with the new cohort mates, but also with other cultures. In this case a multicultural perspective should be taken, and perhaps introducing some issues such as “netiquette”, ways in which different cultures consider short responses, photographs posting, jokes, treatment among class mates and instructors, and other things, will have to be addressed in the orientation. Programs that are 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 above mentioned, plus those related to making the students more acquainted with the instructors and program staff. Orientation is a good opportunity to start an educational virtual environment that can persist and help the development of collaborative projects between members of different geographical communities (Bouras et al, 1999).

Electronic discussion is unique, 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 comfortably to work within a group than in his own culture, where issues such as gender, age or social background could influence or impede team work (Kiesler, 1992).

No matter how distant one student is from his peer, or his instructor, in Internet-based learning, distance is less important as an obstacle for collaboration.

6. **Instructors and/or coordinators:** An ideal situation for an orientation would bring together the coordinator of the online course in collaboration with the instructors in the program, especially those teaching the first 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, and a good basis for building learning communities. 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.

The orientation can then become a good learning opportunity also for instructors in the field of new technologies.

Because most current faculty received their degrees prior to the information and technology explosion, they may have little training and therefore have developed little or no confidence in the use of new information technologies (Breivik, 1998).

Regarding content areas the orientation will provide instructors an opportunity to introduce their courses and the technological applications used in their classes, as well as helping the technological support in training on the applications that will be used in the program.

Strategies used in orientations

Orientation activities can be offered at any time between the enrollment process and the beginning of classes. There are some characteristics of these programs in terms of their contributions to student learning. Their formats include face-to-face orientation, remote, or combined methods. The programs 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 quite effective in helping the group become familiar with the methods of distance learning instruction, group formation and technological-skills troubleshooting. The technological level of students is easily determined having them altogether in a computer lab practicing with the applications they will be using in class. This can help instructors and technical support learn about how easy some applications are used by the members of a cohort. This immediate feedback is very important because it provides those in charge of the course/program with clues on what things need to be improved before the course starts, or what things will need more tutorial help during the course and make provisions towards that.

Face to face orientation can take some hours in one day or can take 2 or 3 weeks, when the orientation will include several type of activities that will involve one or more short workshops on some technological applications, some social activities aimed at team formation and trying to make the members feel identified with the cohort, and introduction to courses, by the coordinators, or the instructors.

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/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 the first semester course. 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 and this will provide a kind of Internet-based training for the program itself. In this kind of orientation the presence of a 'help desk' or 'live help' will be very necessary because students will be asking their questions in the process. This kind 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 process and they appear on stage when classes start.

Remote orientation can take the shape of a tutorial and be delivered on line, or via 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 also 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 make up teams or to get to know each other better as members of a cohort. This remote orientation process is welcomed by those that start up a distance learning program from different and remote geographical locations, in which case, thinking of a face-to-face orientation would become impossible. HRE Online uses this remote methodology for the orientation process. The orientation includes a "New Student Technology Orientation and Setup" website, 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 and some of the faculty in the HRE Online courses. This interaction is conducted via the communication technology applications that will be used during the courses in the Master's program. These applications include the uses of e-mail, chats, and electronic boards of discussion.

Combined methodology for orientation

When a face-to-face orientation program is possible for the members of a cohort, but this has to be brief in time because the students cannot spend more than a day at one location, a good orientation can make use of both 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 three relevant areas: training in technological skills, group/team formation and course information, and the remote and face-to-face orientation can be planned in a complementary way. 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. Meeting their classmates and learning about their backgrounds can also start online, so making up teams will easily be done in the face to face encounter. In this case the face to face will 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. They usually share the motivation to improve their knowledge through the completion of a degree and the distance that separates them from the college campus. These differences and similarities can be brought to a common ground offering activities that address the students' needs to carry on those programs successfully. Each virtual campus communities must tailor its orientation programs to the needs of their students, emphasizing the importance of this process that will facilitate students' transition to the new experience. Clearly, traditional and modern elements of education merge in this new technology- mediated learning experience. Students' needs will not only be reflected in the effective use of software applications but also, and very importantly, in his integration to the virtual educational communities of which he will be citizen in the completion of his career, and will probably persist.

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