The Use of Technology in Online Orientation: Bridging the Gap

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in technology have made a significant impact on higher education and in particular distance and open learning. It is now possible to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation, lack of motivation and address the need for greater synchronous interaction for distance learners using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In distance education it is critical that effort and emphasis be placed on ensuring that the transition from the traditional classroom to the virtual environment has minimal challenges for distance learners.

In this regard, the provision of student support as pre-course, in-course and post-course activities is an important aspect of making such a transition. Technology has revolutionized the way in which orientation is organized for distance learners. The International Technology Education Association (ITEA, 2000a) alluded to the fact that "recent research on learning finds that many students learn best in experiential ways by doing, rather than only by seeing or hearing" (p. 5).

This paper will share online orientation approaches that are currently utilized by the Programme Delivery Department at The University of the West Indies Open Campus. In the Open Campus, experiential activities have ensured that the distance learners who access the orientation are exposed to the actual nature of the learning environment before registration. The technology is used to organize an enriching start-off experience for new students.

This paper will also outline the four-phased approach used for orientation of students: (1) Introduction to the Online/Virtual Classroom (Navigation Skills); (2) Introduction to the Programme Structure; (3) Introduction to the Online/Virtual classroom (Practical Activities); (4) Interacting with Actual Course Instructors. The perceptions of the participants will be presented as vignettes from student testimonials analysed through codes and themes from the data.

Key words: open and distance learning, online, orientation, learning technologies, navigational skills, student support

INTRODUCTION

The University of the West Indies began its operations in 1948 at Mona in Jamaica as a University College affiliated with the University of London, and became independent in 1962. The University is now a dual mode institution offering teaching by distance education as well as face-to-face. The University has four campuses. Physical campuses at Mona in Jamaica, St Augustine in Trinidad and Cave Hill in Barbados, and a fourth campus, the Open Campus, made up of University Centres in various Caribbean countries. The fourth campus, the Open Campus (UWIOC) was established in 2008 to better serve the underserved countries of the English-speaking Caribbean. In support of the University's vision, which is by 2017, to "be globally recognised as a regionally integrated, innovative, internationally competitive university, deeply rooted in all aspects of Caribbean development and committed to serving the diverse people of the region and beyond" the UWIOC offers teaching by distance education using a blended learning approach through its geographically dispersed 42 locations within 16 Caribbean countries. At present, it boasts an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students.

Profile of the Open Campus Learner

In looking at the profile of a typical Open Campus learner, Hunte (2010) indicated that the age range of students is between 20 and 39 years, and they are sole income earners employed for over 5 years, and are predominantly female. Schuemer (1993) outlined that "many distance-education students are older, have jobs, and families. They must coordinate the different areas of their lives which influence each other: their families, jobs, spare time, and studies"; these are also features that are evident in the UWIOC's students, most of whom would have so far studied via face-to-face mode; working in a virtual environment would be new and perhaps somewhat intimidating and de-motivating if they believe they do not know how to cope online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Orientation is the cornerstone in ensuring that online students function effectively. Berge (2001) supports the idea of some sort of induction for new distance learners by asserting that "instructors have a right to expect that participants will come to distance learning experiences prepared to study effectively at a distance. Students should be provided with materials such as a Student Handbook, a preliminary screening survey, or even a mini-course that would help ensure that learners acquire appropriate study and learning skills and understand their rights and responsibilities in a distance learning course" (pp. 20-21). The orientation should focus on addressing problematic areas that online students usually encounter prior to starting an actual course. This will eliminate the problem of students who are not properly trained because the training is more of an afterthought (Bozarth, Chapman & Lamonica, 2004). Berk (2009) posited that "a video can have a strong effect on your mind and senses". These videos should illustrate to the students how to operate in the online classroom in a way that inspires and motivates the learners. As such the Phase 1 of the online orientation was a self-instructional course with the use of video clips which demonstrates how to utilize the learning platform features within the online teaching-learning environment.

Mensch (2009) noted that as "online withdrawal rates continue to increase, academic institutions must brainstorm methods to ensure that students are successful within an online course". Parker (1997) stated that "we can positively affect retention rates by implementing orientations to help make students aware of what will be required of them and of the support services available to help them through those requirements". From the inception, the orientation should incorporate the use of tools such as e-mail, instant messenger, company intranets, as well as forum posts in the online learning environment. These tools should be used to communicate and guide the students to participate in the activities that are organized for them. As Willis (1992) rightly stated, "it is important to make students aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication to be used in the course". Therefore, the use of forum posts, for example, will expose the students to this medium of communication from the inception of their

exposure to the orientation course. The ICT offers a worldwide forum in which to teach courses that can be dynamically updated in ways never before possible.

APPROACH TO THE ORIENTATION

The four-phased approach to online orientation conducted by the researcher and her team of Course Delivery Assistants in the Programme Delivery Department (PDD) of the Academic Programming and Delivery Division (APAD), was introduced in September 2012. The online orientation was designed to assist new students to develop the required navigational skills and prepare them for their academic journey as distance students. Mensch (2009) posited that "a student orientation course should be delivered in an online environment to accustom students to the interface they will encounter and the necessary skill requirements". The researcher can identify with Mensch's statement as this is the approach that is used in the PDD's orientation for new students. The approach ensures that students are exposed to the use of the learning platform prior to the start of their actual courses.

Overall, 707 new students were involved in the September and January online orientation for the academic year 2012/13. The orientation was designed with activities to address specific problems that new students usually encountered. The activities included: how to edit their profile pictures, how to add a discussion topic, how to reference sources accurately and how to upload an assignment to name a few. The orientation session lasted for approximately six weeks and was done in four phases. The students actively participated in the activities that were developed for them during the orientation. Prior to the start of Phase 1, a synchronous session is held via the web conferencing tool Blackboard Collaborate (BbC), to allow students to have real time introductory interaction with their faculty administrators as well as get an overview of the orientation activities that are planned for them.

Phase 1: Introduction to the Online/Virtual Classroom (Navigation Skills)

In Phase 1 of the PDD online orientation students are given the opportunity to engage with their actual learning platform (Moodle) - the Open Campus' virtual classroom - in a course called 'Introduction to the Learning Exchange (LE)'. This introductory course is a self-study course that is, there are no facilitators in the course to guide and direct the students as they complete the course. However, the students are able to get assistance through the News Forum and email support; if they are struggling. Despite the fact that the course does not have instructors to point students to doing the various activities on a regular basis, the course is set up to ensure that students are able to manage successfully. To succeed in this self-paced course, students are required to review each of the topics which are presented as a video clip to demonstrate how to employ the feature or activity within the Learning Exchange environment. After watching all of the videos in a single unit, it is recommended that the students take the self-test at the end of each Unit. An "Activity Room" is created to allow students to interact with members of staff asynchronously over a two-week period after completing the self-tests to clarify navigational issues.

Phase 2: Introduction to the Programme Structure

The focus of Phase two (2) of the orientation session is exclusively on the programme advising**.** This session is usually held synchronously using the Blackboard Collaborate web conferencing tool. The programme advising is very instrumental in ensuring that students are made aware of their programme structure through meetings with their Programme Managers and other PDD staff members. Here, students are exposed to the different levels, the duration, as well as the total credits needed to complete their overall programme. Through these meetings, it is ensured that students are prepared for the course registration period and can move into Phase three (3) of the orientation.

Mensch (2009) highlighted "the need to have students who are educated on the dynamics of an online class and to understand what will be expected of them as online learners will improve the student's

success within the course". The programme advising sessions are designed to stipulate the structure of the degree programmes. They specify the content of the programme and what courses students are required to do to satisfy the content requirements for a degree. Therefore, it is important that all students attend these sessions in an effort to obtain information concerning the degree programme he/she has chosen. The programme advising documents are usually posted on the website of the PDD for ease of reference. Important to note is that, these programme sessions provide students with tips on how to register and combine their courses for a successful completion. For example, all students are required to sit their Foundation courses, such as 'English for Academic Purposes', in the first year, and important information such as this is conveyed to all students at Phase 2 of the orientation.

Phase 3: Introduction to the Online/Virtual classroom

Students must complete their registration before they can access Phase 3 of the orientation. This phase was designed to test the students' knowledge using an active learning approach. This learning approach is supported by Chickering and Gamson (1987) who stated that "learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves" (p. 3). In this phase, the students are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learnt during Phase one (1) of the Introduction to the Learning Exchange course. The students are given various activities to simulate an actual course and show off their improved navigational skills. These activities included updating their profile, participating in quizzes, uploading assignments, adding discussions, citation (referencing), accessing emails, and becoming familiar with the plagiarism policy. Interestingly, the activities in this phase are created to teach the students about the institution while testing their navigational skills.

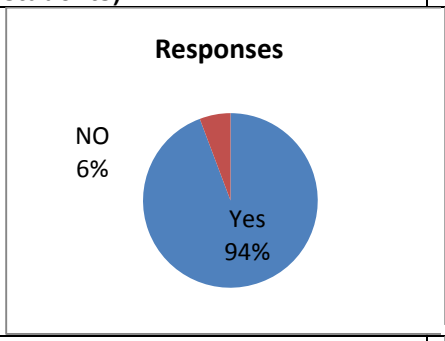
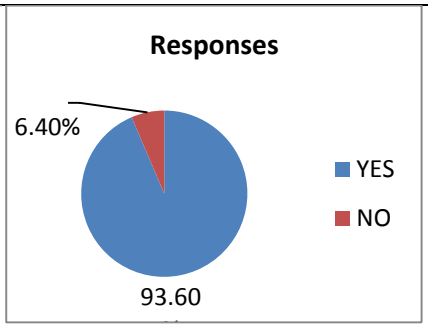
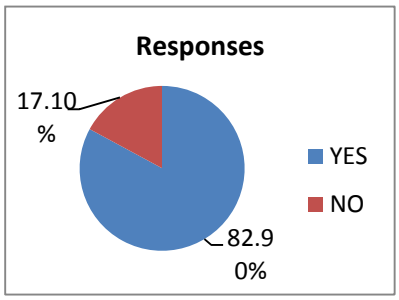
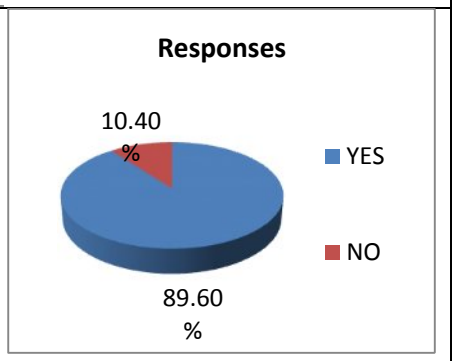
Phase 4 Interacting with Actual Course Instructors

Phase four (4) is done prior to the first week of teaching. Here, the students interact with their actual Course Coordinators and e-Tutors. The aim of this phase is to give students an overview of what is expected of them in their courses. PDD recognizes that laying out the course expectations in a comprehensive manner prior to the start of teaching is important to pave the way in ensuring that students are directed toward the kind of effort, learning, performance and classroom behaviors the Course Coordinator and e-Tutors expect from them. Furthermore, it helps the students to use their time productively since time management is key for completing a distance course successfully. This also helps those students who are still uncertain to make a decision to stay in the course or drop the course. The course orientation activities enable the students to: upload a close-up picture of their face to 'humanize' their course page, post a welcome message to introduce themselves and outline their expectations of their Course Coordinators and e-Tutors.

WHAT WERE THE VIEWS OF THE LEARNERS?

The aim of the research was to determine the usefulness of the orientation sessions to students. The author used surveys, conducted using Survey Monkey, as well as a discussion forum for students' reflections, to get feedback from students. Based on the responses received, learners' perception of the orientation appear to support the view of an active learning approach built into online orientation before the start of any course, helps them to develop the required navigational skills for successful interaction in online learning (Chickering and Gamson, 1987).

Survey Response Summary:

Questions	September - Academic Year 2012/13 (sample size 35 students)	January- Academic Year 2012/13 (Sample size 48 students)
Do you think that the UWIOC should continue with the Online Orientation for new students?		
Do you believe that the Online Orientation was beneficial in preparing you for your courses?		
What was the most important thing(s) that you learned?		• Plagiarism • Navigational skills • Study skills needed for success
How can the UWIOC improve the online orientation?	• Larger windows for videos • Longer orientation • More user friendly site	• Allow more time to navigate • Use more motivational strategies • Provide more updates

Vignettes - Student Testimonials

Based upon the students' reflections, the orientation session made a lasting impression on our students and achieved the aims of PDD Online Orientation to assist new students to develop the required navigational skills and prepare them for their academic journey as distance students. A few of the students' comments on the PDD Online Orientation are shared below:

Vignette 1

To me, the Programme Delivery Department (PDD) Orientation course was essential and obligatory. This experience was very vital to the success of my journey with UWI Open Campus since it opened me to the do's , don't and what is to be expected throughout my journey as an online student. Everything ranging from forum discussions to the uploading of assignments and so forth was informative and beneficial. I am very pleased with the outcome of my experience and certainly do not see the necessity of additional explanatory material.

Vignette 2
This is my first time doing an online course. It was a great experience and everything went well, questions were answered promptly. Finding my way around was easy as instructions were clear and simple. I really enjoyed every bit of it. I hope when classes commence I can say the same.

Vignette 3
I believe that this course accomplished what it had set out to do, that is, to help students learn to manoeuvre their way around the online system. I was impressed with the structured way in which the course was conducted: the information and exercises were sequenced well and the resources were apt and helpful. In addition, I was satisfied with the quality of the responses of the course personnel and their responses were given in a timely manner. Even though I studied at UWI before, I learned important things that I was not aware of; for example, my knowledge about plagiarism was greatly expanded – for instance, I was not aware of the different levels of plagiarism and that the treatment of the issue depends on the severity of the offence.

CONCLUSION

It is critical that new students are given a comprehensive orientation to the online environment prior to the start of teaching. The online orientation should be designed taking into consideration problems that students are likely to encounter and clarifying them way ahead of the start of teaching. It is important that the orientation is conducted in the actual environment that the students are expected to operate in their actual course. The aim of the PDD in using this online orientation strategy was to utilize a four phase approach to familiarize all new students to its virtual classroom. Based on the results after the two presentations during the year, further research will be conducted to ascertain whether students who benefited from the orientation remained in their programme of study.

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