

Chapter 3

Case Study:

Preparing Students for Active Engagement in Online and Blended Learning Environments

Sophia Palahicky

Royal Roads University, Canada

Adrianna Andrews-Brown

Royal Roads University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Student orientation programs can enhance new student self-esteem, which is in turn a significant positive predictor of personal, social, and academic achievement (Hickman, Bartholomae, & McKenry, 2000). Furthermore, these programs can help students develop the basic technical skills they will need to be active learners. According to Dixon (2010), research into effective online instruction supports the argument that “online instruction can be as effective as traditional instruction, [and] to do so, online courses need cooperative/collaborative (active) learning, and strong instructor presence.” Likewise, online orientation programs for new students must provide opportunities for active engagement and strong facilitator presence to be effective. This chapter presents a case study that describes the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the online orientation modules for new students at a Canadian postsecondary institution that offers primarily blended and online programs.

INTRODUCTION

Orientation programming is commonplace at colleges and universities across North America; it is understood that as students begin their studies, they are undergoing a transition and students benefit from a structured orientation experience (Mack, 2010). Although research on orientation and transition programming predominantly focuses on traditional university populations (18-22 year old, undergraduate students at four-year institutions), evidence suggests that transfer students and students returning to education after working or being away from structured educational settings also derive benefit from

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orientation and transition programs, including increased academic success and social integration (Kirchner, 2015; Mayhew, Vanderlinden, and Kim, 2010). Jacobs (2010) outlines the benefits and purposes of orientation programs, including: “(a) disseminating information, (b) reducing costly errors, (c) building a framework for academic success, (d) building community, and (e) defining campus culture” (p. 30). Jacobs’ list highlights the wide-ranging scope of comprehensive orientation programs and the level of expectation placed on transition programs for new students.

Gall (2014) conducted a study to determine if an in-person library orientation would serve students better than an asynchronous online orientation. The results of the study support that there was no difference in retention rates between the in-person and online orientation. However, the online orientation improved students’ self-efficacy (p. 286). Self-efficacy is one’s prediction of performance based on perceptions about one’s ability to complete a task or behavior (Lim and Kim, 2003). Self-efficacy affects attitudes, motivation, and student success. Based on Cho’s (2012) recommendations, online orientations can increase students’ self-efficacy in several capacities: interacting with peers and the instructor for academic purposes, self-regulating in online learning, effectively using the tools of the learning management system (LMS), and preparing students for social interaction with peers in the online environment. This chapter describes the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the online orientation modules, hereafter called LaunchPad, for new students at Royal Roads University (RRU) located in British Columbia, Canada.

Setting the Scene

Three RRU students prepare to begin their program of study and they all have sundry needs and apprehensions. Student A is Tim, a 45 year old working professional who resides in western Canada. Student B is Kai, a 19 year old international student from China. Student C is Mary, a 22 year old transfer student who resides on Canada’s east coast. Each of them composes an email to their respective program contacts to communicate a unique set of anxieties.

Tim’s Email

When I received notification of my acceptance into the master’s program I was extremely elated. Now that my euphoria is gone, I am feeling some anxiety. I am not very efficient at using technology and so being in a blended program that uses so many e-tools will require a steep learning curve. I need help.

Kai’s Email

It is exciting that I am coming to Canada and starting my program with the International Study Centre at your University. I am feeling a bit nervous and need to ask some questions. Where will I live? How do I apply for a work permit? How do I communicate with my classmates and instructors? I am feeling excited but also uneasy about this experience because there are so many things that will be new for me.

Mary’s Email

I am pleased to receive confirmation of my acceptance as a transfer student into the BA program at your institution. I am looking forward to starting my program but will admit I have many questions. I feel a

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