

Working Together: Building an Online Orientation

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Introduction

This was a collaborative project that came about out of real necessity. Most distance education students by nature already feel somewhat disengaged from the University and its resources and services, so it is very important that we get these students off to a good start and provide them with a foundation for successful registration, activation of email and Blackboard accounts, activation of library accounts, and at the least provide them with a brief overview of the types of services and support that are available to all University of North Carolina at Pembroke (UNCP) students in general and to distance education students in particular.

We have carried out the orientation process for distance education students in various ways over the years and always with only limited success. What makes this particular version so interesting is that it involved several campus stakeholders: the Office of Distance Education, the Library, University Computing, and the Writing Center, to name a few. Working together, we have built an interactive and engaging resource with a few personal touches, such as using video introductions, flash instructional videos, and providing links to all the relevant university resources and services that these students might possibly need. We also divided the labor for this project in such a way that it did not put a great burden on any one person.

Another innovation we are attempting with this orientation is addressing the growing problem of students who are not suited for online learning enrolling in online coursework. Invariably, these students find out that online learning is really not their cup of tea, so to speak, and then they withdraw from the course after the drop/add period has ended. This can effectively keep students who are well suited for online learning from having a seat in a class that they desperately need, especially students in our lateral entry programs. The first section of the orientation now includes a self-assessment for students, who ask themselves a series of questions that cover topics such as learning styles, motivations, comfort with technology, etc. There is also a brief interactive review assessment at the end of the orientation, where the results are emailed to the Office of Distance Education.

Literature Review

After a brief literature review, it is quite apparent that there is a dearth of peer-reviewed literature related to the creation and use of online orientations; however, the most generally agreed upon key concept is that “successful orientation programs should provide learning experiences that help students understand and make adaptation to change” (Robinson, et al. 1996).

Distance Education Programs at UNCP

UNCP has experienced tremendous growth in online instruction from its first class in the fall of 2001 to the spring of 2008, where UNCP has now grown to a total of 116 online classes and over 600 hybrid or web-enhanced classes. Our distance education programs also include instructional sites at area community colleges and also on post at Fort Bragg. The new orientation, while specifically created for online students, will be used by all students in our distance education programs.

Past Orientations

The way in which we have conducted orientations for distance education students in the past has met only with limited success and reached only a fraction of our off-campus students. Students could either come to campus for an orientation session or complete an online version using Blackboard; the Blackboard version only contained a few static resources, although it was revised over time.

The face-to-face orientation sessions concentrated on setting up network accounts, using Blackboard, and accessing the University's library resources. The online version of the orientation was different. Students were given logins to access a Blackboard course site, which provided students with an overview of Blackboard. A brief library presentation was also later added.

The New Orientation

There were several reasons the Office of Distance Education wanted to change the way we conducted the orientation. Realizing the technology "climate" was changing, we wanted the students to have a much more interactive experience. There was a real increase in the number of enrolled students who already had previous Blackboard experience, either from high school or other college classes. For that reason, the orientation session needed to be about more than just Blackboard. We wanted it to be a true orientation to the University and address aspects specific to distance education programs.

The orientation is divided into a total of eight sections. It includes an introduction by Dr. Charles Tita as well as a quiz that reviews some of the major concepts presented in the orientation. The six major sections of the orientation are:

1. **Is Online Learning for You?** Provides a video introduction that explains to students the nature of online coursework and the rigor involved in taking an online course successfully. It also provides a pre-assessment for students. The pre-assessment provides students with a series of questions and a simple scoring rubric where students can analyze their potential success in an online class environment.
2. **Network Accounts** provides students with a video introduction made by a Melanie Jacobs who handles technology training for the University. There are also links to online resources and flash videos that provide instruction concerning activation of network accounts, troubleshooting, and relevant technology policies.
3. **Blackboard Basics** covers the interface and functionality of the Blackboard learning management system. Terry Locklear provides a video introduction that covers all of the avenues of technology support for students. There are links to a number of flash videos that cover the navigation of a typical Blackboard course site, as well as trouble-shooting resources for technology woes commonly experienced by students.

4. **Library Services** provides specific guides, tutorials, and instructional videos that discuss off-campus access to library-related resources and services.
5. **Writing Center** usually only receives a cursory mention at best, but those of us who provide support for distance education students have discovered that many distance learners regularly have questions related to organizing and writing research papers. Distance education students require the same access to writing center services as on-campus students. Dr. Teagan Decker is the new University Writing Center Director, and she enthusiastically participated in this project.
6. **Other Services** provides ready access to entities such as Disability Support Services, Financial Aid, the Bookstore, etc. Having all of this important contact information in one place helps to make this resource a useful reference for students to refer back to when necessary.

Each section has a video introduction, because students are more likely to watch a 60-second video than to read a text introduction. The video not only introduces the student to the information that is presented in the section, it also puts a face with a name for students, emphasizing the University's motto "Where learning gets personal."

Technology

The technology used to create the orientation included an assortment of several hardware and software applications. The webpages were built using *Dreamweaver 8* using CSS style sheets for a consistent look. We used a Cannon GL2 camera to film the videos. For the initial video edit, we used *Microsoft Movie Maker* to fade the videos in and out. We then exported the videos in a smaller frame size so they could fit into the HTML window. After that, we converted the video to *Flash* using the *Macromedia Flash 8* video encoder. The self assessment and review quiz were developed using *PHP/MySQL* code.

Initial Findings

We carried out the initial analysis of this new online orientation using input from faculty, staff, and students. The findings indicate that the students are engaged by this resource; however, it is a bit long if students click on every linked resource during one session. So, this issue needs to be addressed in the introduction, where we can provide instructions how to get the most out of the orientation.

We have also received some feedback on the pre-assessment, and it does seem to provide students with a useful analysis of their learning style and preferences. Currently there are no policies or procedures in place at this time, nor are there likely to be in the future, that will require students to choose a specific course of action based on their individual pre-assessment analysis.

The Future

We are currently revising the orientation to make it more streamlined and efficient. We want students to have this very important information, but we also do not want the students to spend half a day navigating the orientation. We are also creating more flash instructional videos to show students the actual processes of using Blackboard, webmail, course registration, and electronic database resources.

However, our biggest problem is, and will probably remain for some time, that we cannot require students to complete the orientation. Also, because our students are not required to use the University's email system, we also have a problem marketing the orientation to students. We are working with distance

education faculty asking them to require completion of the orientation prior to the end of the drop/add period.

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About the Presenters

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