‘ORIENTATION MODULE’ TO INCREASE EASE OF ACCESS TO ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Jan Brace-Govan, Sandra Luxton & Peter Wagstaff
Department of Marketing
Monash University, Australia
jan.brace-govan@buseco.monash.edu.au
sandra.luxton@buseco.monash.edu.au
peter.wagstaff@buseco.monash.edu.au

Abstract

Evidence from evaluation studies indicated that ensuring a smooth start to the semester would enhance the experience of online learning for both students and staff. The development and evaluation of an ‘Orientation Module’, that combined technical and social purposes, is reflected on here. The module was found to significantly increase the ease with which students accessed their online learning environment.

Keywords

online education, orientation, transition, innovation

Introduction

The importance of regular, personalised interaction with other students and members of staff throughout the learning process, whether at a distance or in face-to-face teaching, is well-documented (Garrison, 1985; Laurillard, 1993). This is a concept with much support from the self-directed, life-long learning model of further education in adulthood (Evans & Nation, 1996; Laurillard, 1993). It is therefore important to ensure that students are familiar with the online learning environment and are able to participate in the discussion forum. This paper reflects on an evaluation of an introductory, student orientation module which was developed as part of a larger innovation. It was an exploratory project which aimed to increase student familiarity with a novel learning environment. Although the focus was the online discussion forum, the wider web-based resources of Monash University were included, as well as the various software functions.

Evaluation Identifies a Need

The Department of Marketing, in the Faculty of Business and Economics of Monash University, received substantial funds to develop an innovative Master of Marketing which is delivered flexibly and online across all campuses. Some students decide to learn via the Internet because attendance on-campus is difficult for them. In the Department of Marketing, they are often mature-age students who have middle management positions which demand long working hours and they study part-time to maintain relevance to their industry. All postgraduate distance education subjects are presented via WebCT. The numbers of students is lower in comparison to the on-campus intake (35 compared to 80).

Successive evaluations of this innovation have shown that, although many students are quite comfortable with online learning, there continue to be factors affecting use. One indicator of this is the participation on the discussion forum where some students dominate the postings and others

lurk. The unevenness in participation was not due to any lack of enthusiasm on the students' part. Evaluation surveys showed that 85% of the students were satisfied or very satisfied with the learning materials available, the logic and coherence of the development of the subject and the contact they had with staff. Evaluation of the website returned even higher levels of satisfaction (95%). However, semi-structured interviews and open-ended responses on surveys suggested that students perceived some drawbacks with the online learning process. In addition students' expectations depended on their prior learning experience. Distance education students were often delighted with additional contact, while students who were used to face-to-face teaching described the same experience as lacking human contact (Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). In spite of their positive attitudes, and taking their expectations into account, some students still expressed concerns that focussed mainly on technological functioning and familiarity with the learning environment.

The additional effort required by students to understand the unfamiliar software meant that the students had a lot to assimilate in their first few weeks of study. Furthermore, as part-time postgraduates, they were often only enrolled in one subject which meant that they were only actively aware of one contact person at the University – their online teacher. The students unfamiliarity with the software, coupled with their unfamiliarity with Monash University, placed a significant burden on online staff because student difficulties with hardware or software usually resulted in them contacting their teaching staff member for technical advice. Sometimes this was within the staff member's experience although at other times it drew the staff member into a protracted intermediary role between student and IT support staff from the Faculty. In addition, the delay created by technological needs had a domino effect and created some social difficulties. The online learning group was no longer a coherent cohort as some students were behind in their studies and not socially 'in step' with the other students who started immediately. For a learning medium that relies on significant levels of student-to-student interaction in discussion forums, this is problematic.

Social awkwardness online is not restricted to students who have to deal with technological gliches. Online forums can be daunting and knowing how to present oneself in a learning forum is not necessarily obvious either to regular computer users or to novices who might be less comfortable with computers. Learning how to learn online begins with learning how to present oneself and what kinds of cues to look for in textual interaction.

Overall, technological or social issues, alone or combined, have the effect of making an uncomfortable start to the semester for some students and an undesirable increase in workload for staff. A step needed to be inserted to relieve the burden on both students and staff at the beginning of the semester, not only to encourage group formation, but also to commence effective teaching as soon as the semester started. These students had a need to be orientated to Monash University through the medium by which they learn. What was required was a short, focussed, separate, discussion forum directed at all newly enrolled off-campus students. Experienced staff who could guide students through the technological issues and facilitate appropriate interaction would moderate this forum. The 'Orientation Module' was a modification within a larger innovation, designed to make the path smoother for both students and teachers.

Development of an Orientation Module

The 'Orientation Module' was developed using principles of moderation and group formation for online learning derived from Salmon (2000). The module addressed the first two stages of Salmon's five stage model. It is a peculiarity of the online environment that students need to set up (build) and navigate their learning environment where on-campus students might read maps to find buildings or lecture theatres. Therefore *Stage one* is completed when all technical links are successfully made and the first message from the student using the software (WebCT) is sent. The next crucial difference to on-campus learning is, that students usually have had some kind of face-to-face learning experience and so know, in a general sense at least, how to behave and socialise

with other students and teachers. Even if they are uncertain of exactly what the social norms might be, on-campus students can always observe others until they feel comfortable. If online students only observe - nothing will happen. *Stage two* of Salmon's model identifies the process of initial socialisation. Although information exchange was included in the 'Orientation Module', this was to familiarise students with the software functions required for the online learning process, where Salmon's intention was that these later three stages are concerned with the processes of learning subject content. Focussing on these first two stages of Salmon's model a few short, but pertinent, exercises were devised along with commentary from the moderator that would direct the students to engage with WebCT and discover some shortcuts and useful protocols. Although the purposes of the activities in the 'Orientation Module' were either technological or social, in practice the activities aimed to combine both aspects as far as possible. The technological purposes were to successfully establish technological links between the student's system and the university, give an introduction to the functions in the software WebCT and, assist students in using WebCT effectively through hints and tips. The social purposes were to facilitate students' social interaction with each other (and staff) by modelling appropriate language and textual formatting and, offer students a forum in which to practise where it is clear that all the other participants are also inexperienced.

The 'Orientation Module' ran for three weeks with most activity during the on-campus orientation week itself as well as the week before and the week after. The asynchronous nature of the discussion forum offered flexibility and allowed students some leeway in the pace of their interaction. The moderator visited the forum frequently to ensure that students obtained relatively immediate contact. An important need for these students is to overcome feelings of isolation as well as to develop student-to-student communication. The 'Orientation Module' made use of the variety of University services available online to give a focal point for the interaction and simultaneously demonstrated the diversity of support for distance education students and gave them practice with WebCT functions.

Evaluation of an Orientation Module

During the third week of the 'Orientation Module' the semester began and students were able to join their online subjects. The 'Orientation Module' had been offered to all online students for Semester one, 2001, which included thirty-five students. Nineteen out of the thirty-five students, accepted the offer to participate and one group of twelve students from the 'Orientation Module' was tracked through the first four weeks of the semester. The expectation was that orientation students would be able to access their subject forum sooner than non-orientation students. The mean number of days to access the site for 'Orientation Module' students was 2.3 but the mean number of days for non-orientation students was 10.6 which substantiated the overall aim of the 'Orientation Module'. By day one of the semester, six of the orientation students had joined the conference and by the end of the first week there were ten involved. With the exception of one non-orientation student, fifteen did not get started with the subject forum for seven or more days. Of that fifteen, eight non-orientation students did not start for more than eleven days. The comparison demonstrates that the 'Orientation Module' had an impact on the amount of time it took students to join the subject discussion forum.

The other aim of the 'Orientation Module' was to facilitate socialising among students. The twelve orientation students represented a range of activity levels including: one that did not take part in the 'Orientation Module' in spite of being registered; another that did not join the subject forum despite being active in the 'Orientation Module' and; one that was relatively inactive on the subject forum but quite active on the Orientation forum. Of the remaining nine students, various levels of activity in the orientation and subject forums is evident but, the majority, six students, are consistently active. Five students maintained levels of readings and posting fairly similar to each other giving the impression of a dialogue in the subject forum. The suggestion here is that the other principle aim of the 'Orientation Module', to facilitate social and learning activity, has been successful and analysis of the discussion forum could confirm this suggestion. This has not been

addressed as ethics permission has not been received.

However, other evidence from the mock assignments that students posted in the 'Orientation Module' tentatively support their engagement with the wider University. To practise the assignment function, students were asked to visit the Monash Postgraduate Association and then submit a short report. The reports suggest that the students found the site fun and full of unexpected information and research links. Comments suggested that they would make use of this facility. Further positive feedback came from the evaluation survey at the end of the module.

Conclusion

Overall, the students that took part in the 'Orientation Module' did access the subject site more easily than those who did not complete the 'Orientation Module'. Their activity patterns suggest that they are engaged with the subject and were possibly working together. Their commentary, from different sources, suggests that they found the process useful and that it made them aware of the wider university. This is positive support for this modification to an innovation, confirming the direction taken after evaluation of the larger endeavour. Further analysis of the discussion forum could provide evidence that could be useful. It would also be helpful to interview staff to discover how they perceived the exercise and to extend the data with further reviews of the 'Orientation Module' from the start of other semesters. In spite of these shortcomings, the project was considered to be successful. A future development of the project would be to offer all students an introduction to learning how to learn online. Given sufficient resources, in particular specifically assigned IT and teaching staff, this kind of orientation process could introduce students to their learning environment in one week. By focussing on removing firewalls, obtaining passwords and access to libraries organised, as well as facilitating familiarity with the software and internet resources in a concentrated period of time, the experience of learning online would be enhanced for both students and staff.

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