I am Sam, Sam I am: Online orientation for off-campus students

Andrea Nazzari, Division of Student Life – Deakin University

Abstract

Orientating yourself to a university campus can be a daunting experience. But what happens if your Campus is a virtual one? Roughly 30% of students enrolled at Deakin University study off campus, many of whom live in rural and regional areas, interstate and overseas. In early 2010, a tailored online orientation program for off-campus students was launched. The Vice-Chancellor provides the initial welcome and then students are guided through the site by an avatar named Sam. Sam introduces the content throughout the three sections of the orientation: Getting Started; Resources; and Living and Learning. This session will unpack the development of the online orientation and will incorporate the creation of content, the inclusion of student input and the challenge of design.

Background

The delivery of higher education has dramatically changed due to the increasing capabilities of technologies (Natriello, 2005). In addition, many rationales for utilising these technologies have also surfaced including enhancing the quality of learning, and broadening access to education (Bates, 2000). Due to the ever-changing student cohort, trying to define a 'typical student' is near impossible. The student cohort has expanded to lifelong learners, many of whom are working full-time and often raising a family whilst studying, making attending a physical campus unfeasible (Bates, 2000).

In 2008, Deakin University conducted the biannual *Getting Started at Deakin* survey, which focuses on the transition of students into tertiary study during their first six weeks of Semester 1. Results from the survey indicated that only 19% of the off-campus student respondents attended the tailored orientation program conducted on campus (Deakin University, 2008). In addition, less than half the respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with the orientation activities accessible to off-campus students.

The survey results compelled the newly-established Transition unit to change the way in which it offered orientation opportunities to off-campus students in order to "respond to the growing demand for lifelong learning" (Bates, 2000, p.34). We needed to move forward and orientate students in the way they would be learning: online.

In 2009, the Transition unit committed to the creation and implementation of an online orientation tailored for off-campus students. This online orientation aims to provide all off-campus students with the opportunity to become familiar with Deakin, its support services, and online environment, prior to commencing their studies, regardless of where they live.

Development

During the initial development stage, it was important to take into consideration information currently provided to off-campus students to ensure the site complemented existing resources rather than duplicating them. While the face-to-face off-campus student orientation program, *Off to a flying start* was not accessible to all, student feedback indicated that the content was relevant and beneficial. In 2010, *Off to a flying start* was reduced from a two-day program to a one-day program and focused primarily on study skills. Of the 868 students who live in Victoria, 27% attended (Bishop & Lever, 2010). This statistic further supports the need for the online orientation, not only for students who live interstate and overseas but for those who prefer flexible delivery.

Off-campus students also had access to an off-campus student web page and received a printed *Services guide for off-campus students* booklet. The off-campus student web page was accessed by a 78% of respondents and only 24% found the off-campus publication to be of value (Deakin University, 2008). In 2010, the online orientation replaced the off-campus student webpage and the printed publication was redeveloped to create *The A-Z to Deakin 2010 for off-campus students,* which complements the new approach. The publication contains information relating to all facets of the University including: contact details, key Deakin web pages, support services and recourses, student tips and frequently asked questions and concerns.

Once the content for the online orientation site had been finalised, the team worked closely with the University's educational design staff to create an environment that supported effective delivery. An avatar was introduced as a way to bring movement and sound to the process, to create a more interactive and communicative approach.

One particular challenge we faced was computer access for remote students in terms of connection and speed (Owens, Richardson and Hardcastle, 2008). In addition to providing all new commencing off-campus students with printed publications and letters throughout the trimester, the Vice-Chancellor's welcome video and avatar's speeches within the online orientation have an accompanying transcript.

Content

The online orientation assists students to make a successful start to university and has been specifically designed to meet the needs of off-campus students. The site contains key information and resources including:

- o Key Deakin web pages and contacts

- o Exams and assessment

- o Deakin Studies Online (DSO)

- o Course materials and textbooks

- o Library

- o Study skills

- o Student services

- o Deakin University Student Association (DUSA)

- o Visiting campus

- o Student Profiles

- o Your say

Meet Sam

Reushle (2006) suggests that the internet can mirror authentic worlds and allow students to explore. Sam is an avatar who is incorporated into the orientation site to simulate face-to-face interaction. He assists students by guiding them through the content, as well as providing advice as students navigate their way around the site which is consistent with adult learning principles such as self-directed learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, as cited in Reushle, 2006). The presence of Sam and his interactive prompts is the key difference between this site and any other collection of static web pages.

Future Directions

Moving forward, the Transition unit will continually develop the online orientation based on student and staff feedback, in addition to investigating the potential to implement an online mentoring program. The online mentoring program will utilise both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication, which may assist in reducing the feeling of isolation for off-campus students (Buchanan, Myers & Hardin, 2005).

Furthermore, research indicates that first year on-campus students are spending less time on campus and more time online (James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). This has lead to discussions about creating an online orientation tailored for on-campus students unable to attend the face-to-face program.

Nuts and Bolts session outline

The Nuts and Bolts session will include a brief presentation detailing the development of the orientation site, including:

10-minutes: Online Orientation overview

- o Challenges we faced around the design of the site and issues of accessibility

- o Evaluation and continuous improvement

- o Future directions

Participants will also be guided through the live site in a similar manner to if they were a newly commencing off-campus student. Upon conclusion of the presentation, audience members will be invited to participate in group discussions.

10-minutes: Small group discussion

Brainstorm activity

Audience members will be asked to form small groups and brainstorm one of the following topics in a group and feed back:

- o Strategies to create a supportive orientation program for off-campus students

- o Strategies to maintain accessible support for off-campus students throughout their studies

- o Online orientation versus face-to-face orientation: benefits and challenges

- o Implementation of an off-campus student online mentoring program: benefits versus challenges

10-minutes: Whole group discussion

Each small group to present ideas discussed in the brainstorming activity in addition, audience members will be invited to ask questions regarding all aspects of the online orientation, in order to stimulate further discussion regarding off-campus student support.

References

Bates, A.W., 2000, *"Confronting the technology challenge: strategies for college and university leaders",* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, California, pp. 16-29, 34-5, 217-20

Bishop, M., and Lever, R., 2010, *"Report on orientation programs, Trimester 1, 2010",* Deakin University, unpublished paper

Buchanan, E., Myers, S. E., and Hardin, S. L., 2005, *"Holding Your Hand From a Distance: Online Mentoring and the Graduate Library and Information Science Student",* The Journal of Educators online, <http://thejeo.com/Elizabeth%20Buchanan%20Final.pdf>, accessed 26 April 2010

Deakin University, 2008, *'Getting Started at Deakin Survey, 2008 University Report'*, Geelong Waterfront

James, R., Krause, K, and Jennings, C., 2010, *"The First Year Experience in Australian Universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009",* Centre for Higher Education, The University of Melbourne

Natriello, G., 2005, *"Modest changes, revolutionary possibilities: distance learning and the future of education",* Teaching College Report, 107, pp.1885-1904

Owens. J., Richardson, B., Hardcastle, L., 2008, *"Increasing satisfaction and retention of isolated students at Deakin University",* Deakin University, unpublished paper

Reushle, S., 2006, *"A framework for designing higher education e-learning environments",* in T Reeves & S Yamashita (eds), "Proceedings of world conference on e-learning in corporate government, healthcare and higher education 2006", AACE, Chesapeake, Virginia, pp. 1405-12, EdITLib, <http://www.editlib.org/?fuseaction=Reader.ViewFullText&paper_id=23907>, retrieved 10 May 2010

I am Sam, Sam I am: Online orientation for off-campus students, Andrea Nazzari, Nuts and Bolts