

Introducing Newie: A simple idea for a complex issue

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Abstract

The University of Newcastle introduced a simple character to the Orientation activities and resources to aid in providing cohesiveness to the first year experience. 'Newie' was introduced to commencing undergraduate students via the student diary, orientation publications, websites and a Facebook site. Orientation changes have been occurring for a number of years and Newie has been another step towards providing social and academic orientation effectively.

Introduction

The University of Newcastle has been making changes to the orientation activities for first year undergraduate students over a number of years. A more University-wide approach was introduced in 2010 that attempted to provide similar experiences across all Faculties. A character named 'Newie' was introduced in 2011 to assist in ensuring students saw the whole orientation process and associated activities throughout the year as a continual, holistic process.

In previous years students had been sent an enrolment pack in the mail and were advised to read the material and enrol themselves online. A recognised need to encourage social integration during orientation activities saw a formal student mentoring program introduced across campuses in 2008. In 2009, the student services division of the university began to actively promote the advantages of using services via competitions such as campus passports. In 2010, students were invited to attend 'Program Information and Enrolment Sessions' in which they were provided with program specific information followed by enrolment assistance in computer labs.

The increase in these activities and opportunities for student engagement however did not necessarily result in a greater degree of engagement with the university from first year students. Attendance at Program Information and Enrolment Sessions were low (an average of 40%), return rates for services competitions and workshops were disappointing (less than 5%).

In 2011, 'Newie' was used in publications, on websites and on items handed out to first year students which allowed the University of Newcastle to simply flag with students the relevance of that item or activity to them as first years and to provide a cohesive and holistic orientation program that addresses both academic and social integration needs. The overall aim was an improvement in the first year experience.

Recent Past Orientation Activities at University of Newcastle

Prior to 2010, the University of Newcastle provided all commencing undergraduate students with an enrolment pack that included a guide to the University, program specific information and information regarding services available. This pack was mailed to each student with

instructions on how to enrol online at the student system called My Hub. Students were then expected to read the material, enrol online and then attend O-Week, which in some cases was the first time a student set foot on campus.

Kantanis' (2000, para. 12) research shows that "the development of a friendship network was a major contributory element" for students transition to university. The research showed the importance of addressing both academic integration and social. It was acknowledged that orientation at University of Newcastle was not sufficiently meeting the social needs of students prior to 2010 and this was causing a lack of engagement.

In 2010, a new program was established that was almost a month in duration and include a number of activities aimed at introducing first year students to the campus, the Faculty, the program and their fellow students. The program included program information and enrolment sessions that were held in program cohorts across two and a half weeks, followed by a week of bridging courses and then the traditional 'O-week'. O-week included Faculty specific Orientation activities and the more social activities and events expected. Student Services conducted a passport competition and introduced a series of voluntary workshops which were designed to meet the needs of commencing students.

There were a number of issues identified with the 2010 Orientation program: poor attendance at program specific activities (40%); information did not reach new students in time; O-week activities were not promoted as heavily as planned due to the low attendance at program specific activities. The entire program was not cohesive and small pockets of activity occurred across units, both academic and service based. Students also identified a lack of awareness of student support services that were available and their location, the services passport competition earning a return rate of less than 5% and workshops being poorly attended.

In 2011 this program was adjusted to address the issues identified by students after the 2010 Orientation period. The program information and enrolment sessions (PIES) were not presented as optional, although an alternative was provided to students who could not attend in the form of a website including lectopia recordings. This resulted in an average of 80% attendance per session. The activities in O-Week were further expanded to ensure a greater presence for Student Support Services. Faculties and Support Services worked closely together to provide a full day program for students that included integrated workshops.

Tinto (2002, p2) states that "the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate." The 2011 Orientation program attempted to address this as a whole experience. Academic and social events were tied together and provided a number of different cohorts for students to belong to and begin to socialise in.

It is important to note that in 2010 and 2011, 60% of commencing undergraduate students were classified as 'non current school leavers'. They were not straight out of high school. Many had previous qualifications whether through a VET provider, an enabling program or other tertiary study, or those who had completed their HSC some years ago. The University of Newcastle has a wide variety of lifestyles, likes and dislikes to contend with.

Newie's Birth

Newie was designed by a young graphic designer specifically for a new first year experience website called My Journey (Scevak, Dluzewska & Kirby, 2011). My Journey represents the

personal, social and academic journey students will go on during their first year. The website was developed by University counsellors in conjunction with the School of Education.



Figure 1 - Newie

The character of Newie is shown as a student going through aspects of University life. Newie immediately caught the eye of a number of staff and it was decided to expand his use. The graphic designer was then engaged to design a number of different images showing Newie in various University specific activities.

This has resulted in the Newie character being used in the following areas:

- 2011 Student Diary
- Z-card – UNI101 Hints for Families and Friends
- Orientation website
- Orientation handbook
- Accommodation website
- My Journey website
- Orientation goodies such as water bottles, USBs and drinks vouchers for ‘Newies Shout’
- Facebook Newie page

The use of Newie in all of these areas provides a non-threatening link between all the activities and possibilities available to a first year student. Newie also provided a visual link between faculty and general campus activities throughout the Orientation period. The continued use of Newie is hoped to continue to flag with students’ important information and has provided the University with cohesion across activities that were not previously completely linked.

Finding Newie

As mentioned previously, Newie is found in a large variety of publications, websites and goodies. The images have all been designed by the graphic designer for specific uses and care has been taken to ensure the images are relevant to the specific page, topic or date in the diary. No back story has been provided to allow individual interpretations.

The 2011 Student Diary displays Newie prominently on the cover and throughout in various poses that assist in flagging specific information or dates. This has been presented in as humorous and interesting way as possible. The images range from Newie with a pile of books, Newie with cups of coffee, as the Queen on Queen’s Birthday, with friends laughing, and wearing a trencher.



Figure 2 – Diary front cover

Newie was also a feature of the Orientation Website where his image was found making new friends, clutching stationary and looking quizzical and promoting services and the workshop series. The previous year’s diary had a character that remained static and was on nearly every page. The character has been likened to a condom with wings and student feedback was not positive.



Figure 3 - Newie Orientation Week slide from home page of web site

Student Services provided each new student with a drink bottle which artfully listed the suite of available campus services under the heading ‘Support for students – How refreshing!’ accompanied by a cartoon of a refreshed Newie.



Figure 4 – Newie banner from services page in Orientation Website

The images of Newie have then been replicated through the other publications, websites and goodies. The replication and relevance of the images ensures that those websites and publications that are aimed at improving the first year experience are cohesive. It is hoped that Newie acts as a flag to first years to gain their attention and to identify resources that will be of use to them.

Newie’s use throughout resources that relate to either academic or social orientation to the University has ensured that the entire orientation program is cohesive and effective. Student feedback is currently being sought through a short survey on their thoughts on Newie. It is hoped that Newie has positive feedback and that he has assisted students in identifying activities or information that they may need.

Where to Now for Newie?

It is intended that Newie will continue to be a guiding light for first year students and he will continue to provide advice through his Facebook page. There are a number of possibilities in mind for the continued and expanded use of Newie in 2011 including:

- “The Newie Story” – competition amongst visual communication students to relate aspects of the first year student experience which also includes the newie image within content of film. Films to be no more than 2 minutes duration and will feature on University’s website.
- Adoption of Newie by SOS Mentor (student mentoring) program. To feature in future SOS Mentor merchandise and training programs
- Where’s Newie? Competition – encouraging students travelling around the Hunter Region to send pics of a plush Newie toy in front of local landmarks. Images to be placed on the Newie facebook page.
- Assessment of effectiveness of different forms of ‘Newie’ promotion.

Conclusion

The University of Newcastle has used a very basic idea to help tie together the very complex issue of academic and social orientation to tertiary education. The character of Newie has provided cohesion to the many activities and resources available for first year undergraduate students. First year students are now provided with a complete orientation program across a number of weeks that provide the information they require as well as the opportunities to develop new networks and cohorts. Feedback is currently being sought and is expected to be positive regarding the overall Orientation experience and Newie in particular.

References

- Scevak, J, Dluzewska, T & Kirby, D (2011) <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/students/my-journey/>
- Karanis, T (2000) The role of social transition in students’ adjustment to the first year of university *Journal of Institutional Research*, Vol 9 No 1, May 2000 Retrieved 23 February 2011 from <http://www.aair.org.au/journal/volume-9-no-1>
- Tinto, V (2002) Establishing Conditions for Student Success: Lessons Learned in the United States Retrieved 20 February 2011
<http://faculty.soe.syr.edu/vtinto/Files/European%20Access%20Network%202002%20Keypnote.pdf>

Key Questions

- Does Newie’s use have a time limit?
- Should a more comprehensive explanation of Newie be provided instead of allowing students to attribute their own emotions or experiences to the images?
- How do we go about ensuring that Newie’s image remains appropriately used by staff wishing to promote services and activities?

Session Outline

- 20 minutes presentation, including showing images of Newie and asking audience members to attribute a feeling or experience to each image or document shown
- 10 minutes discussion around the key questions identified