Co-Creation & Just in Time Orientation: Engaging Students across the multi-campus and distance education environment.

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Abstract

Orientation is often viewed as a one week, one size fits all, one way session for the delivery of information. The focus of this paper is to report on a series of Orientation initiatives in the Faculty of Business which resulted in orientation developing into an ongoing and collaborative process between students and the institution. The aim of the approach has been to promote a sense of belonging and engagement while simultaneously providing learning support via a “just in time” framework.

Introduction

Enabling and generating the right support networks for students is essential to their sense of belonging and community as they transition to university. (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However, previous research into support networks “from above” (official university) or “from below” (informal friends/family) have not clearly identified which structures are the most effective for students (Morosanu, Handley, & O’Donovan, 2010). These different social support networks can have both a positive and negative influence on students engaging and staying at university. Moreover, forming good relationships at the beginning of university can affect students’ academic performance and success (Vinson et al., 2010). The formal and informal social networks at university begin during orientation suggesting that this a crucial time for students, but although official orientation may end in a week the students’ transition and development of social networks continues on throughout their first session (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to present a strategy of “on-going and collaborative orientation” designed to use university support systems, and encourage the students to develop personal networks within their course.

Designing an orientation program aimed at supporting diverse student needs is complex and challenging (Gibney, Moore, Murphy, & O’Sullivan, 2011; Palmer, et al., 2009). This orientation project was designed for a regional, multi-campus education provider with a large proportion (approximately 2/3) of students studying part time via distance education (DE). Students are drawn from both urban and regional backgrounds; are increasingly diverse in age and socioeconomic background; and enter the university through multiple entry pathways. Many need to work while studying and may be supporting dependents. The multi-campus, mixed mode (i.e. online and face to face) nature also creates particular challenges for the logistics of orientation delivery. Over a period of three years using stakeholder feedback and self assessment, the Faculty of Business has shaped an orientation approach that complements the wider university O Week and online initiatives. The aim of the Faculty approach has been to enhance student sense of belonging, promote engagement and provide support at crucial points via ongoing just in time (JIT) intervention throughout the first year of study. Preliminary evaluation indicates these initiatives have been received positively by students.

Orientation to University
There has been much focus in recent years on the transition of students into higher education and the importance of the first year in this transition (Gale & Parker, 2011; Kift, 2009; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, Angelo, & Cross, 2008). Orientation is used as a part of this transition process to familiarise and socialise students into the university context and to reduce feelings of ‘placelessness’ (caught between home life and university life) (Palmer, et al., 2009). Our institution offers the traditional “from above” orientation i.e. delivered in the form of a week of information sessions, and includes social activities, student orientation mentors, information booths on clubs, societies and services, library tours, special interest group sessions (e.g. parents and supporters sessions, mature age, international, disabilities).

In the online environment, both internal and DE students access an online program which steps them through the process of enrolment in subjects, obtaining an ID card, introduces them to the student communication processes, the Student Charter, Student Central and orients them to the online study environment, the library and support services. It also introduces them to a “student community” and discusses “preparing to study” and includes some “study success tips” and recommends pre-session enrolment in free online academic preparation programs such as writing, science, maths and statistics.

**Faculty Based Orientation Program**

Given the broad coverage of the University wide Orientation program, the consideration for the Faculty of Business in designing our Faculty specific orientation was how we could “value add” to the university program and support the university wide initiatives of promoting a sense of belonging and engagement and also facilitate some of the “from below” support networks. Data reported from the AUSSE (ACER, 2010) revealed that “first year students are more likely to remain at university and continue to subsequent years if they are able to have regular contact with teaching staff and if they feel supported by their university”(p.1). Wilcox et al (2005) also reported that social integration with peers has been linked with student retention. The AUSSE also found that the extent to which students are intellectually challenged is also linked to the likelihood that they will persist beyond their first year of study (ACER, 2010, p.9) but that “support in gaining basic study skills and the ways in which subjects are taught” is also important. (p.11). Brown, Keppel, Hughes, Hard, Shillington & Smith (2012) suggest that successful learners begin with the end in mind i.e. have a conscious vision and plan for their future. Lastly, research into brand communities (Schau, Muniz Jr, & Arnould, 2009) has highlighted the emerging phenomenon of co-creation as an effective value-add competitive strategy. In particular, interactive practices have been shown to foster greater customer engagement and increase feelings of integration.

**Phase 1 - Engagement, Belonging, JIT Support, Co-Creation and Professional Life**

From the research it appeared important we design a program that promoted a sense of belonging and engagement, facilitated contact with staff, provided ongoing support to students to gain information and skills, challenged students educationally, encouraged students to envision the future and allowed students to be participants in the process. Kift (2009) and others (Leske, 2008) have also highlighted the concept of orientation as an ongoing process that doesn’t stop after O week.

The following section contains a brief overview of the initiatives and the students’ responses (assessed using qualitative focus groups).

Faculty O Week Orientation Day 1

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Co-creation and Just-in-Time Orientation, nuts and bolts.
This half day program provided the students with an opportunity to meet and engage with academic and administrative staff via a series of subject rotations. The students indicated that meeting both lecturers and fellow students was valuable. The rotations in particular received considerable support; students felt that the group rotations were valuable and engaging as group activities help everyone get used to each other. The students commented that the day had a comfortable and relaxed feel to it and the interactions were friendly. Information sharing was another clear theme; students found the lecturers in the rotations to be helpful and friendly. Students also appreciated meetings others in same course, as well as lecturers, specific to course, being able to ask questions regarding all things. The feedback sheet suggested that students felt clarifying issues of university as whole, meeting people, and setting expectations were all helpful.

Faculty O Week Orientation Day 2

The focus of this second half day program was on facilitating the development of relationships with peers and introducing students to the types of challenges and problem solving activities they would likely face in the classroom. Students were engaged in “co-creating” videoed advice to future students. Problem solving activities were also videoed. These videos were later edited and placed online for all students to access. The respondents said they liked the group work and meeting people. They enjoyed the presentation style and enjoyed being actively involved in the workshop. The students said the workshop helped them to relax and feel more confident about their current situation.

- R4: I think it is a lot easier to approach people now like it was very awkward at the start they should call it awkward week
- R8: I liked the business thing where we did those group activities
- R5: then people started to cross over, like I met Jim in like my Mgt and then I met him out so like it was both. You start talking to random people and then you realise you have heaps in common and then you start seeing them everywhere

Just in Time emails

This component of the strategy provided students with a series of emails about key issues (HECS census date, accessing the library, learning skills assistance, scholarships, money, stress) at crucial points during the session when the information was deemed to be most needed. For example, below is a JIT email sent through the first year course site which contains both “from above” and “from below” social support strategies:

“The deadline to withdraw from subjects without academic penalty and avoid an unnecessary HECS-HELP debt is this Friday, March 23. If this is the case, you can vary your enrolment at the Online Student Administration Office, in the add/delete subjects section. Take 5 minutes to view the Video on how to enrol or vary your enrolment in your subjects. You should always consult your Subject Coordinator for advice before you make any changes, or talk to your Course Administrative Officer, who can advise you about how this will affect your enrolment pattern. You can also seek advice and support from Student Services, who provide excellent counselling and learning support services. And remember too, that if you are finding uni challenging or complex it might be reassuring to read about what others are experiencing by accessing their blogs on your subject sites. This could provide you with the kind of support that is only possible to receive from your peers.”
Students indicated that these emails were helpful and welcome such as R3: who said she “especially like reminder ones, I always forget”.

Student blogs

Students were invited to share their first year experience at university via a regular blog. Three students were chosen to write blogs (one for each campus). The students varied in age and experience and each developed a different style in their blog. For Pip, the blog became a place to share her feelings:

- “It is a bit daunting knowing that I have these next 3 assessments due within the next 2 weeks and then having to study for the exams not long afterwards, it is proving to be challenging but with the support of friends around me and family just a phone call away makes things a bit easier and helps me keep in the right frame of mind.” Pip

For Megan, a mature aged student the blogs were a space where she could discuss practical aspects of studying such as:

- “Have started looking at the Library resources to assist in completing the assessment tasks and have printed out a copy of the APA Referencing Summary. Also, looked at EndNote as this was suggested as a way to ensure the correct style of referencing is used consistently, just don’t want to get bogged down with all the tools and get nothing done with them. Wonder if anyone else has had some experience with EndNote previously?” Megan

For Vaughan, the blog was a social space where he could talk about his social agenda. For example:

- “uni has been very busy with an overload of work thrust upon us. most are getting through it but I think a few are struggling to keep up. There have been a few more themed nights over the few weeks with the foam party not as much of a hit as first thought on the CSU G Facebook page.... The tight ass Tuesdays are always welcome to us uni students with lunch on $2 and dinner only $5, what’s not to like! the food sells out pretty fast so you have to be quick to get a cheap feed! I hope everyone is liking uni I’m still meeting heaps of people around uni and is great getting to know them all. I think the next three years are gonna be very fun indeed. until next time, study hard but play harder :)” Vaughan

My Professional Life Session

A series of four workshops aimed at helping students envision their future professional life. The workshops culminated in a visit to industry. The respondents indicated that they found the sessions helpful, particularly visiting industry.

- R2: like do more of it, like throughout the session like we had other sessions for this, but more industry visits
- R9: The first one was on PebblePad and the second on work life balance. I guess it was about giving us the heads-up on things, now I’ve got something I can use for work experience, and I know I need to learn how use PebblePad with my work experience
Conclusion

The university “from above” orientation strategies were designed to facilitate the students “from below” interactions. Given the importance of the formation of support networks at university, the focus of the activities was on group interactions, community building and engagement. The “from above” university activities continued throughout the first session to ensure that students were supported during their transition to university. The results from the qualitative data provide evidence to suggest that the students’ viewed the strategies as valuable and the primary aims of engagement and interaction were achieved.

References

Kift, S. (2009). Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education: Final report for ALTC senior fellowship program. Strawberry Hills: Australian Learning and Teaching Council

Table Questions

• What initiatives have your institution trialled particularly for DE?