Developing an online orientation workshop for first-year students in a distance education context

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Introduction

Engagement and success in tertiary study is a key focus of the Tertiary Education Commission's 2010 – 2015 strategy and government funding is currently directly linked to course and qualification completions (Ministry of Education, n.d.). However, this funding system disadvantages distance education institutions as course completion rates are generally lower compared to face-to-face teaching institutions (Boyle, Kwon, Ross, & Simpson, 2010; Smith et al., 2011) . This is further complicated by Open Polytechnic (hereafter referred to as the "OP") students being a unique student cohort. OP students are mostly mature students, fitting in study alongside a range of other roles and responsibilities. Because of work and other commitments, such as caring for family, the majority of students study part-time. Of the 34,413students enrolled with the OP in 2012, 68 per cent were in employment and 93 per cent were studying part-time (Open Polytechnic Annual Report, 2012). In addition, more than half of students (60 per cent) are over 30 years of age and have been out of the academic world for some time. In fact, one in five (22 per cent) students studying at the OP do not have any previous formal qualifications (Open Polytechnic Annual Report, 2012).These factors mean that students may arrive at the OP with little understanding of the conventions, language or expectations of the tertiary environment and as such face an even greater learning burden in their first year of study.

Research shows that having a successful first year of study is critical to long-term student success (Earle, 2007; Krause & Coates, 2008, as cited in Grant, Olivier, Rawlings & Ross, 2011) and that early and appropriate learning support has a positive impact on student retention (Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008). It is therefore imperative that suitable support programmes are in place for first-year students. While the Learning Centre at the OP supports all students, it focuses on first-year students in particular in order to help those students make a good start to their study and stay engaged with it[2]. A variety of programmes using a range of technologies have been

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[2] In 2012, the Learning Centre was able to directly support around six thousand students. 3755 first-time students were contacted at least once by the Learning Centre's peer mentor team; 1321 students participated in online study skills workshops; 774 students had individual consultations with learning advisors; and 151 students had their assignments reviewed through the writing support service.

developed by the Learning Centre over recent years. In 2012, an online introduction to study at the OP, known as the Online Orientation Workshop (hereafter referred to as the "Orientation"), was developed and trialled. This paper provides a brief literature review of e-learning design principles and student success factors in e-learning environments. It then describes the Orientation, its learning outcomes, the design process and its key features. At the end it presents conclusions.

Literature Review

Learning and teaching approaches has been impacted by the development and use of the internet in the last twenty years. Online learning or e-learning are terms used to refer to the usage of internet or the World Wide Web to enhance learning and teaching (Gedik, Kiraz, & Ozden, 2013).

E-learning is different from the more traditional face-to-face model. Learners must interact in a virtual and digital environment where face-to-face interactions amongst facilitators and learners no longer exist. One of the key challenges when developing e-learning courses is the creation of a positive online experience for students where they can feel capable and in control (McAlpine, 2009). Another challenge is to offer clear and accessible content. According to Milne and White (2005), although online learning environments offer exciting new ways to present information, develop skills and build learning communities at a distance, there is an inherent risk in employing untested technology and approaches. Using research as a basis reduces the risk during the design process.

Moises (as cited in Elias, 2011) points out that distance and online students are diverse and have a range of study schedules, timelines, work and family commitments which all affect their availability to study. The OP teaching situation occurs in this context, as discussed previously. Elias (2010) outlines a helpful set of design principles that need to be considered to meet the challenges faced by distance students. Some of these principles are:

- Equitable use: The design and contents should be accessible to all learners, despite their level of ability or location. To achieve this, content should be provided in well-recognised formats that suit learners with different abilities (such as those with hearing, visual or learning impairment) and all be available online.
- Flexible use: To allow for a level of autonomy, learners should have some choice in how they access material. For example, via video or audio script, and be given a selection of topics to choose from. Details of where to find further information should also be included to allow for extra investigation. Further research is usually achieved by links to additional reading or useful external websites.
- Simple and intuitive design: The interface should be easy to understand, regardless of the learner's experience in the online environment. This involves

testing navigation carefully and including tips on where to go next, or how to return to a previous page, when necessary.

- Development of a community of learners and support: The environment should promote interaction and communication among learners, tutors and support staff, through forums and other direct communication methods like phone or email, and information about how to access support services.

- A positive instructional climate: Comments and feedback from the facilitator or tutor should be welcoming and inclusive. A positive learning environment means regular and considered communication from instructors, involvement in discussion forums, and availability for one-on-one consultation.

Furthermore, Merril states the following constructivist principles for design: Learning is promoted when new knowledge is demonstrated to the learner, when existing knowledge is activated as a foundation for new knowledge, and when learners engage in solving real-world problems (as cited in Gedik et al. 2013).

In terms of designing authentic learning activities Olivier, Herrington and Reeves suggest that they need to provide opportunities for students to explore specific topics using a variety of resources, provide opportunity to collaborate, ask questions and reflect on students' beliefs and values (as cited in Gedik et al., 2013). The Orientation presents each module with relevant written and audio-visual content and supports reflection through the provision of quizzes that allow students to test themselves on what they have learned and apply it to their own context. Collaboration with other participants and the facilitator is then encouraged via interactive forums.

In terms of how to structure the information provided online, McAlpine (2009), states that online content needs to be concise, easy to find, easy to read and easy to use. Thus, online courses or workshops should include course pages[1] that meet the following key points:

1. Can people get the gist of the course page in three seconds, without scrolling or reading every word?

2. Does the content of the page look well-organised, calm and orderly?

3. Is the essential information at the top or top left of the page (as most website readers look to the top left first, then down and across, in an 'F' pattern)?

4. Does the first paragraph contain a summary?

5. Are the words familiar and easily understood? Are the sentences 20 words or fewer?

6. Are the paragraphs 65 words or fewer?

7. Does the content use the word "you", speaking directly to the reader?

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[1] Course page here refers to one of a set of webpages that form an online course.

8. Are the links useful, well-placed and up-to-date?
9. Can all readers/learners get the information from this page regardless of their physical abilities, computer browser or systems?

<div align="right">(Adapted from McAlpine, 2009, p. 7)</div>

As well as providing content that is easily accessible to students, the students' own self-regulation of learning is a crucial factor that impacts on their success in e-learning settings, since this form of learning requires high levels of autonomy (Artino, as cited in Hsu, Ching, Mathews & Carr-Chellman, 2009). Self-regulated learning involves "metacognitive, motivational and behavioural processes that are personally initiated to acquire knowledge and skills, such as goal setting, planning, learning strategies, self-reinforcement and self-instruction" (Zimmerman, 2001, p. 13855). Successful students are those who have these skills and are able to reflect on their learning (Hsu et al., 2009). While OP students use skills such as goal setting and planning in their everyday lives and are motivated to study, many of them have been out of the academic environment for some time and therefore may need to learn how to apply these skills to their study as well as learn new skills.

In terms of behaviours, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (as cited in Hsu et al., 2009) state that self-regulated learners are able to identify and request outside resources for assistance to overcome any frustrations they encounter while trying to achieve their study goals. It has been broadly acknowledged that learners who seek help tend to be more successful than learners who do not (Aleven, Stahl, Showorm, Fisher & Wallace, as cited in Hsu et al., 2009). One of the key aims of the OP Learning Centre is to encourage students to seek help early when they face any issues with their study. The OP offers library and learning support, as well as specific support for Māori and Pasifika students.

Self-regulated learners are also able to plan and use calendars for their studies in order to keep themselves informed about assignment due dates and create effective study routines (Hsu et al., 2009). Such simple tools can be forgotten in the initial stages of a course as students become overwhelmed with information overload. Thus, advice on time management strategies is important at the orientation stage.

Finally, Quinn (2006) states that online course design must focus on experiences that allow learners to engage emotionally as well as cognitively with their learning. Therefore, such design should include activities where learners reflect on their goals and achievements, connect the course content with their own personal experiences and interact informally with online peers through chat forums and non-assessed group work.

Effective course design enhances student motivation through the use of a range of learning media, for example, written information, quizzes and audio-visual resources. Such design also addresses learners' different needs and creates engaging learning experiences. In order to provide a positive learning experience to OP students

and motivate them, the Orientation uses a range of formats from simple written information, to "how to" video tutorials using screen capture software, to animated videos. All videos used are brief and concise (each less than a minute long). Several videos were embedded from online sources and others were developed in house, with the goal of addressing common questions that first time students have. Hsu et al. (2009) found that not only do students enjoy video clips as a part of an e-learning course but video clips also have a positive impact on their attitudes towards study.

Online Orientation Workshop

Learning Outcomes
The following learning outcomes of the Orientation were based on findings of the literature review on student success and an audit carried out by the Learning Centre of common issues that arise for first-year students at the OP.

On completion of the Orientation, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of time management skills and how to use planning tools to support study,
- Navigate the Online Campus[1] and online course page,
- Identify Open Polytechnic services such as the Library, Learning Centre, Helpdesk and Māori office and where to go for specific help and
- Start to reflect on their study environment and habits.

Design and Development Process
The design and development process involved defining the learning outcomes, writing content, and evaluating, selecting and producing resources. This followed the E-ADDIE course development model (Neal, 2011) which links e-learning design principles with the traditional course development stages of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation.

Analysis of the Orientation audience looked at both the diversity of the students studying at the OP as well as the technical constraints which existed in each of their individual study environments. This included identifying the level of computer literacy among students and their access to computer hardware, software and the internet. Although most OP students are required to have online access, download times vary depending on their internet plan, so multimedia resources needed to be used judiciously.

Once the first version of the Orientation was finished, it was tested with a group of eight students and several educational design experts. Student feedback was collected through individual surveys that focused on the content, time involved and accessibility

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[1] The Online Campus is the Open Polytechnic's online environment where students access their online courses.

of the resources. Some of the feedback was positive: "It is a fantastic introduction to online study." "It empowers and would definitely motivate new students." "It helps to connect students through the forums and the videos showing how to use the campus, library and so on.."

There were also some technical issues: "Not sure if it's my settings but the pictures didn't load…", "videos are not streaming well on my network connection" and suggestions from students: "More colourful visuals e.g: pictures, flowcharts…", "The layout is too crammed with text and makes it hard to follow and not very engaging" and "I would prefer a cleaner, more graphic layout."

After collecting the feedback from students and educational designers, the team reworked the Orientation layout and content and new animated videos were developed.

On completion of these changes within the Orientation, the new version was migrated into Moodle 2 and delivered to all first-year OP students.

Learning Management System
The Orientation was developed in Moodle, the Learning Management System (LMS) of the OP. Moodle is one of the most popular LMSs for designing and facilitating e-learning courses in the tertiary education sector (Zacker as cited in Calvo, Iglesias & Moreno, 2012). It offers a variety of features including forums, videos, webpages and quiz development options.

Facilitation
The Orientation is facilitated by a learning advisor from the Learning Centre who enters the online forums at regular intervals in order to add to discussions and answer student queries. All activities are carried out online and there is no face-to-face interaction.

Modules
To address the learning goals, four modules entitled '*Getting Started*', '*Online Campus*', '*Our services*' and '*Where to next?*' were developed. The figure below shows the Orientations' main page with links (shown as rectangular 'buttons') that take the learner to each module.
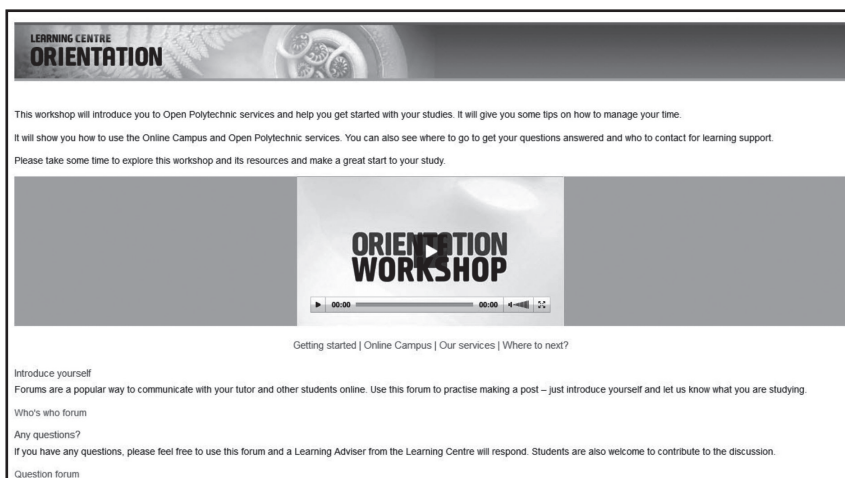
Figure 1. *Online Orientation Workshop main page*

Getting started
This initial module covers how to be successful at distance learning, why online learning is important and how to develop time management skills required in an e-learning environment.

Online Campus
The second module looks at navigating the Online Campus environment and provides answers to common questions that new students have about this particular area.

OP services
The third module outlines OP services and how students can access them, as well as common first-time student issues and where to go for help.

Where to next?
This final module shows students how to connect with the OP community via the OP Facebook page. It also gives information on further online study workshops run by the Learning Centre.

Special features
Student and educational designer feedback on the pilot version indicated that the Orientation needed to be more interactive. In response, several features were added which made use of the variety of tools provided by Moodle, including:

- *An introductory video*, presented by a learning advisor, welcoming new students and providing a quick overview of the Orientation.

- A **'Who's who'** forum encouraging students to introduce themselves and get a sense of who else is participating in the Orientation.
- A 'Questions' forum providing an opportunity for students to have their questions answered by a learning advisor.
- **Quizzes** entitled 'Maximizing your studies' and 'Where to go for help' helping raise student awareness of personal study habits and OP services.
- **Weekly and yearly study calendars** provided in Word format so students can use them on their computer or print them out.
- **Links to learning resources and useful external sites** scattered throughout the Orientation to allow students to explore further information independently.
- A **graduation video** to remind students of their long-term goal of successfully completing their qualification.
- Embedded **animated videos** (see figure 2 below) that use a story format to address common issues that first-year students experience and show where to go for help.
- **Video tutorials** using screencast software to show students how to find and access key information in the OP online learning environment. Information includes how to find their course page, how to access the online Student Manual, how to use the OP Library and how to receive study support.
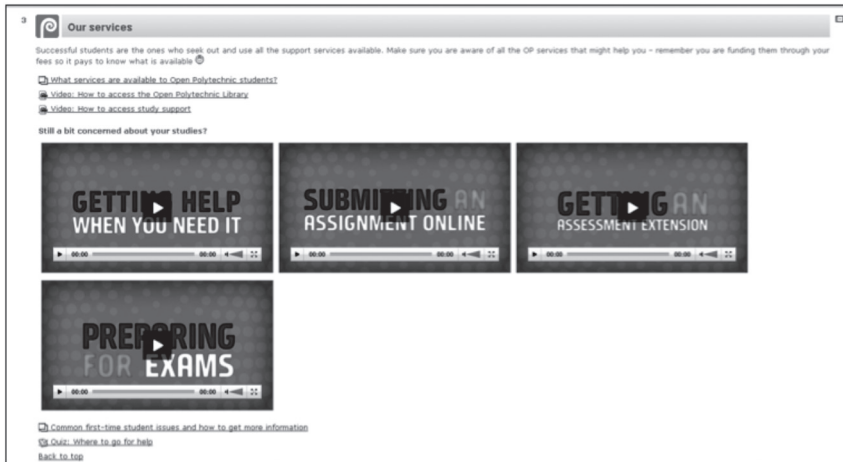

Figure 2. *Module example with animated videos*

Conclusion

Distance students have diverse study schedules, timelines, and work and family commitments which affect the time and energy they have for study. The Online Orientation Workshop aims to cover the factors that are important for student success, including promoting self-directed learning, so that students can set their learning goals, plan their time, reflect on their knowledge and skills and seek help when required. E-learning principles were applied throughout the design of the Orientation to make the learning experience accessible and motivating. Student autonomy was promoted by offering a flexible "learning menu" where they could choose the modules, resources and the amount of time spent on the Orientation (students who tested it reported spending 1–3 hours on average). In addition to traditional text-based approaches, the use of a variety of methods and media to convey information resulted in an interactive and effective Orientation. This, however, is not the end of the process. The Learning Centre will continue to improve the Orientation based on student feedback in order to further promote study success in the future.

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