Orienting Your Online Learners: Culminating Assignment

Question 1

The institution for which you are teaching online is considering developing a Level 1 orientation to online learning and has formed a committee to research the matter. You know how important an orientation to online learning is, so you have volunteered to serve on the committee. At the first meeting, the committee chair asks for reasons why the institution should develop an orientation to online learning.

What would you say? Cite sources to support your answer.

Your answer to the question:

How can we expect our students to be successful in online learning if we don't SHOW them how to be? Every learner is going to come to our online courses with different skills and experiences (Liberman, 2017). And because of this, these students don't have any way of even knowing what they don't know regarding our specific online learning environment (Liberman, 2017). Also, students who are unprepared or have unrealistic expectations about online learning are more likely to fail or drop out of online courses (Coots, 2018), so why would we leave our students in such a state?

The best way we can prime our online students for success is to orient them to the new environment and resources available to them. Through orientation, we can fill the gaps in students' knowledge and skills while providing them with an accurate overview of the learning environment. And because student success is university success, we can anticipate higher stats on important university markers like credit activity, course and program completion rates, and GPAs and lower stats on course withdrawal rates (Liberman 2017).

Orientation programs are win-win scenarios for students and universities, so let's go to the effort of setting everyone up for a good experience.

Question 2

Option 1: After hearing all the reasons in support of developing an orientation to online learning, the committee has decided that it will indeed develop one. You've agreed to continue serving on the committee, which is now planning the orientation. Each committee member has been asked to make recommendations on the following items:

1. **What to include in the [Level 1] orientation**
2. **How to conduct the orientation**
3. **If the orientation should be optional or required**

What would your recommendations be, and why? Cite sources to support your answer.

Your answer to the question:

There are several critical content areas to cover in university-level orientations. I'll share ones I garnered from my Quality Matters Orienting Your Online Learners training (n.d.).

- Where and how to access courses
- General overview of how courses work/what to expect
- Learner's responsibilities
- Technology requirements
- Technical skill requirements
- Time expectations
- Online attendance and participation expectations
- A tour of the LMS, including practice for key activities like updating a profile, getting course notifications/announcements, sending messages, using discussion forums, submitting assignments, and taking assessments
- Attributes, behavior, and skills of successful online learners, like self-motivation, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, study skills, time management, working independently, and keeping an open mind
- Necessary communication skills, like writing, typing, standard English, spelling, grammar, and cultural sensitivity
- Netiquette guidelines
- University policies on plagiarism, incomplete grades, course withdrawal, confidentiality, student conduct, and student grievances
- Available online support services, like technical support, library support, tutoring, accessibility services, etc.

As far as conducting the orientation, I believe it best to offer an asynchronous course through the university's LMS. In this way, students can complete the course at any time or location while "test-driving" the LMS.

Dena Coots, the Director of Distance Education and Instructional Design at Alvin Community College, provided an excellent model for orientations in her article,

"Developing an Orientation for First-Time Online Students" (2017). Coots was tasked with developing a new version of her institution's online orientation that wouldn't take longer than an hour, delivered the needed outcomes, and produced data suitable for administrative decision making. To deliver on these objectives, she created a system of video 15 lessons with accompanying assessments. 6 of the lessons were required, and students then chose 4 more lessons to complete from the 9 other options. The lessons also included "Try It!" buttons that allowed students to practice using various tools in the LMS. This model permitted Coots to require students to complete the most essential topics and then self-select other topics based on their existing knowledge, skill levels, and interests. Once students finished the designated amount of topics and assessments, they received credit for having completed the orientation.

I would sum up the key points from Coots' example in the following recommendations for our university orientation.
- The orientation should take a reasonable amount of time
- The orientation could present several required topics with more optional topics, which allows learners to make selections according to their needs
- The orientation should include opportunities for learners to practice using necessary tools
- The orientation should utilize assessments to ensure student understanding and completion
- The orientation lessons should remain available to students as a reference after completion of the orientation–students may need to revisit topics or explore topics that they skipped over originally
- The orientation should be required but kept to reasonable levels of time, effort, and difficulty so as not to deter student completion

Question 3

You're having lunch with Theresa, another faculty member who teaches online, when the topic of orienting learners to online courses comes up. Theresa says, "I don't see why it's so important to orient learners to each course. It seems like such a big waste of time that would be better spent on the content."

How would you respond to Theresa? Assume Theresa's institution has a Level 1 orientation to online learning. Cite sources to support your answer.

>*Your answer to the question:*
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>I appreciate that creating individual course orientations takes time, but I really do believe that orienting learners up front results in savings of time and effort for instructors overall. Every course and instructor are different (Quality Matters, n.d.), so we can save our learners unnecessary frustration and anxiety by making sure they are competent in the technical requirements for our courses (Taylor et al., 2015), familiar with our particular learning environment and teaching style, clear on what to do when they start our courses, aware of how to interact with us and other students, knowledgeable about course requirements, and apprised of resources and tools available to them (Stavredes, 2011, Location Nos. 1773-1780). And when learners feel comfortable and confident from the beginning, they are much more likely to persist in our courses (Stavredes, 2011, Location No. 1780; Taylor et al., 2015). These benefits for our students equal less time on our parts devoted to answering the same questions and rendering technical support WHILE giving us better course outcomes (Taylor et al., 2015). In my book, that makes creating course orientations time and effort wisely spent.

Question 4

After listening to your explanation of the importance of orienting learners to online courses, Theresa is now convinced that she needs to orient learners to her course. She asks for your advice on what to include and how to include it in her course.

What advice would you give to Theresa? Cite sources to support your answer.

Your answer to the question:

I recently took a great course on orienting students from Quality Matters (n.d.) which provided a valuable list of questions to answer for our students in course orientations.

- How do I get into the course?
- What do I do once I get there?
- Who is my instructor?
- Who else is taking this course?
- What is the purpose of this course?
- How is this course structured?
- What do I need to be successful in this course?
- What are the "rules" in this course?
- How can I get help if I need it?
- How will I know I'm ready to begin?

Let's talk about each of these questions.

How do I get into the course? It's easy to deliver this preliminary information through a direct email or an announcement sent through the learning management system to student emails (Quality Matters, n.d.).

What do I do once I get there? It's very helpful if students immediately see a "Start Here" button, "getting started" instructions, or course overview as the home page when they log in to the course (Quality Matters, n.d.).

Who is my instructor? You could send an intro about yourself in your first email, have it somewhere in the introductory materials inside the course, or post it in an introductions discussion forum. Just make sure to include your name, title, field of expertise, email address, phone number, and virtual office hours. Other good details for an intro are a picture, your teaching experience, personal information about family/hobbies/etc., what students can expect from you during the course, and how you like to be addressed (Quality Matters, n.d.)

Who else is taking this course? Offering a discussion forum for introductions lets students introduce themselves and read and respond to others' introductions (Quality Matters, n.d.).

What is the purpose of this course? Adult learners appreciate having a reason for engaging in online learning and/or a problem to solve (Shaw et al., 2016; Stavredes, 2011, Location No. 592), so understanding "the why" of a course can help them stay motivated as learners. Course purposes can be explained in a course syllabus, course introduction, course welcome from the instructor, or "start here" area (Quality Matters, n.d.).

How is this course constructed? Many important housekeeping items like the course schedule, delivery methods, means of communication, types of learning activities, grading, and assessments fall under the umbrella of course construction. Ways to include this information are a course syllabus, course introduction, course welcome from the instructor, "start here" area, course schedule, course outline, course map, and course calendar. These items are helpful within the course itself, but additional downloadable versions that can be kept on personal computers/devices are convenient for many students (Quality Matters, n.d.).

What do I need to be successful in this course? It's important to make sure that students know the minimum technology requirements and prerequisite knowledge for a course, along with technical and digital literacy resources that are available to them. These items are often covered in university-level orientations, but it's beneficial to reiterate them at the course-level for easy access (Quality Matters, n.d.).

What are the "rules" in this course? We can't expect students to play by our course "rules" if we don't state them. Reminders of university-level policies and course etiquette expectations, learner interaction requirements, and estimated instructor response times are excellent inclusions in a course syllabus, course introduction, course welcome from the instructor, or "start here" area. They also work well on a separate policies page (Quality Matters, n.d.).

How can I get help if I need it? You've already included your contact information, open hours, and response times in your course. If students need further help, quick links to university-level resources will make the process more straightforward for them. These links could be inclusions in a course syllabus, course introduction, course welcome from the instructor, or "start here" area. They also work well on a separate help page (Quality Matters, n.d.).

How will I know I'm ready to begin? Many instructors utilize a quiz to make sure that students have gone through and retained the introductory orientation information. When students can pass the quiz, they are ready to dive into the course materials. Providing an orientation question and answer forum where students can post, you can reply, and everyone can view the interactions can also be useful in bolstering student preparedness (Quality Matters, n.d.).

References

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