

Evaluation of an Online Orientation Course for Online Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present the result of our trial to develop and deliver an online orientation course to bring the target incoming graduate students on board to the new learning environment. We designed an orientation course to focus on the three main factors that relate to their future learning: IT, attitude, and planning. We conducted the orientation course for several years in succession and thus improved our design. To see how students view the learning experience, in this study, we created a questionnaire that includes the three factors that we embedded in the orientation course and the individual qualities advocated by Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap. The results were relatively positive, and we found guidance to improve the orientation course.

Keywords: *Orientation Course, Learning Design, Individual Qualities*

INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to feel comfortable and be productive in a new environment, and usually people need time to get accustomed to it. When people move to a new town or change jobs, they need to understand the role that they play and the procedures in that environment. Like ordinary life, when adjusting to a new learning environment and preparing to start learning activities, warming up is necessary to meet the course expectation. In this paper we report our practice: the provisions of the orientation course for students coming into an online graduate program. We conducted the orientation course for several years in succession and improved our design. To confirm the result of the trial, we created a questionnaire that includes the three factors we embedded in the orientation course and the individual qualities advocated by Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2010) to see how students view the new learning experience and how it can be changed into a transformative learning experience.

The graduate program we are teaching (2009, Suzuki) offers an orientation course to prospective students for the new academic year. Master's students are expected to take over five courses in the first semester; most of them have full-time jobs while being full-time students, therefore, they have not had student status for some time; some might know how to use the online technology through their work, but some may not. A successful transition to the new learning environment for the pursuit of a graduate degree is essential for the learners, and we consider the orientation course as an important first step to bring prospective students into our program.

FIELD INFORMATION

Mission of the Orientation Course to the Target Audience

According to preceding studies, the necessity for an orientation to provide fundamental information related to the students' studies is obvious. In addition to the fundamental information, when we designed the orientation course we included activities to ease the potential anxiety of learning via online and the potential anxiety from technical problems that can be detrimental to the learning process. This does not mean we are overprotecting the learners. Rather, we expect our students to have confidence and to be autonomous. By having students gather information, think, and then act by them before they call for

assistance, we tried to prepare students with a learning experience for the graduate program. Therefore, we put learning activities as a center part of the course to have students think about and design their own learning strategies. Our design policy for the orientation course includes three factors in each activity: IT, attitude, and planning (Meta). IT includes practical activities to acquire the operational skills for study; attitude takes in activities, in which students set a goal to learn according to the new learning environment, curriculum, and with fellow students; Planning (Meta) relates to the activities in which the students set their own goals and plan how to achieve these goals.

Table 1 shows the structure and activities of the orientation course we designed. The three factors of activities included in the course are indicated in the third column. The activities consist of 15 sections, which is the same in all of the courses. The students, therefore, can see how the courses process develops by taking this orientation course as an example course. They are also able to use all of the fundamental functions of the LMS (BlackBoard) in our program. Students meet and get to know their peers on line, and gradually get used to posting their opinions online, willingly and openly. Another important function of the orientation course is to have students consider their learning goal along with the review of the program competencies (Suzuki, 2009).

Individual Qualities

Parrish et al. (2010) advocated a framework that guides the learning experience for an engaging learning outcome. Their framework proposed two qualities to guide the engaging experience: situational and individual qualities. Situational qualities have five points: immediacy, malleability, compellingness, resonance, and coherence as critical factors allowing a powerful learning experience to develop. This helps to design strategies for engaging learning. Individual qualities relate to personal characteristics and include four factors: intent, presence, openness, and trust. Individual qualities also influence the learning outcome, especially online learning and self-directed learning. Parrish et al. implied that the category of individual qualities are generally less considered than situational qualities in design process, but instructions require both perspectives for increasing the quality of learning experiences.

In this study, we focused on the perspective of individual qualities to observe how the students engaged in learning within the program. Intent includes all of concepts such as attitudes, values, hopes, beliefs, likes and dislikes, and assumptions. Presence has three components: being-there, which includes physical and mental presence; being-with, which includes willingness to engage with others in a way that includes empathy and openness to their thoughts and feelings; and being-one's-self, which includes being authentic and genuine in expressing one's own thoughts and feelings. Openness is being willing to submit to challenge, and it admits to depending on others. Trust includes several qualities of effective experience, which includes the belief that positive outcomes can occur and that looking ahead to potential outcomes with engagement will come. The qualities of the individual in the right-most column of Table 1 show the analytical result of which factor of individual qualities is included, among the four factors, in each activity. Most of the sections include one or more factors of individual qualities.

EVALUATION AND RESULTS

Development of the Questionnaires

We developed pre- and postquestionnaires for the orientation course. The design of the questionnaires are based on the three activities embedded in the orientation course (IT, attitude, and planning) and the individual qualities of Parrish et al. (2010). After developing the questionnaires, we conducted an expert review and revised them several times until the reviewer told us to proceed to the next step. Then we conducted a one-on-one evaluation with students who previously took the course. After small modifications, such as wording, we proceeded to the practices.

The questionnaires consist of 19 questions that include all four factors of the individual qualities and the three activities we embedded in the orientation course, as shown in Table 2.

Questionnaire Results

We asked the student participants to fill in the questionnaires in the orientation course. Sixteen among the 18 participants answered both the pre- and postquestionnaires. The questionnaires have a 5-point scale, with 5 as the most affirmative response and 1 as the least affirmative response. Table 2 shows that the overall score was relatively high. The average score was 4.1 ($SD = 0.68$) in the prequestionnaire,

and 4.3 ($SD = 0.56$) in the postquestionnaire. The results show that most of the participants were highly motivated before entering the program, but the results also implied that the orientation course helped students to get on board by increasing their confidence and volition. The questions on presence (No. 5), openness (No. 7), IT (No. 12), attitude (No. 16), and planning (Nos. 17 and 18) showed significant differences between the pre- and postquestionnaires.

The scores for No. 6 and No. 9 were higher in the prequestionnaire than the postquestionnaire. Q6 was relatively high in the prequestionnaire. Q9 was reversed question, and, therefore, we feel that we have not provided clear messages in the orientation course that relate to this question. This is an example in which the study reflects the lack of clarity within the course, and, thus, assists us to know where we need to make improvements.

For further research, we need to combine the results, indicated in this paper, with the written comments in the questionnaire and the students' activity record such as their discussion in the orientation course. An integrative analysis will provide additional concrete ideas to improve the orientation course for the incoming students. Also, as design researchers, we are continuing our study to deliver design principles.

DISCUSSION

Aiming to confirm our trial to develop and deliver an online orientation course that will target the incoming graduate students to bring them on board in their learning experience in a new learning environment, we developed and implemented pre- and postquestionnaires in view of three main design factors and the qualities of the individual (Parrish et al., 2010). In the findings of this study, most participants were highly motivated before entering the program, but the result also implies that the orientation course helped students to get on board by increasing their confidence and volition. Conversely, we found areas within the orientation that need to be improved such as conveying trust in the learning environment in our graduate school.

Table 1. Structure and Activities of the Orientation Course

Section	Learning Activities	Factors of Activities	Information Provided and Its Resources	Qualities of Individual
1	Self-introduction	IT/Attitude	Mental attitude toward learning in the program/Instructors /Office hours	I•P•O
2	Task-check operation	IT		
3	Confirming learning system	IT	Systems of the university	I
4	Posting a message to mailing list	IT/Attitude	Information about student ID • setting about email address/Mailing list	I
5	Create a goal statement	Planning/Attitude	Competencies/Certification of eLearning professionals/Final exam and portfolio	I/P/O
6	Course planning	Planning/Attitude	Conditions for completing the degree (credits/final exam)/Syllabus/assigned reading book	I
7	Writing a reflection paper	Planning	Same resources as section 5 and 6	I/P/O
8	Pedagogical Fundamentals	Planning	Condition of course exemption	I
9	Level check of IT skills	Planning	Assignment for course exemption	I
10	Information Processing Fundamentals	Planning	Information about "Information Processing Fundamentals" as prerequisite course	I/P
11	Reviewing past educational activity	Planning	About learning portfolio	I/P/O
12	Expressing an impression of SCC	Attitude	Story-centered Curriculum (SCC)/ Advice from the seniors	I
13	Expressing use of a HOME page	IT/Attitude	Web pages for SCC	I
14	Requesting of SCC course taking	Planning		O/T
15	Posting to notify the completion of the orientation course	Attitude		I/P/O/T
Other	Q & A	All	Twitter of a senior/Schedule/Instruction of WebCT (LMS)/Course structure/Tips from staff	

Note. I = Intent; P = Presence; O = Openness; T = Trust.

Table 2. List of Questions and the Results

	No.	Questions	Term	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Intent	1	I have a clear idea what knowledge and skills to be obtained at the grad school.	Pre	4.3	0.4
			Post	4.3	0.5
	2	I have a clear idea what I would like to obtain with the exception of knowledge and skills at the grad school.	Pre	3.9	0.8
			Post	4.2	0.5
	3	I have a clear idea what kind of attitude to take toward learning as a learner at the grad school.	Pre	4.3	0.7
			Post	4.4	0.5
Presence	4	I would like to contribute to learning activities as one of the members, but not as a passive learner in the activities in the grad school.	Pre	4.5	0.5
			Post	4.7	0.5
	5	I would like to express my thoughts and feelings at the grad school, even about my deficiencies.	Pre	4.4	0.5
			Post	4.8	0.4
Openness	6	I would like to know various thoughts and ideas during the activities at the grad school.	Pre	4.9	0.3
			Post	4.8	0.4
	7	I would like to give attention to own ideas during the activities at the grad school.	Pre	3.7	0.9
			Post	4.3	0.7
	8	I do not want to resist changing my thoughts about learning, and, therefore, accept the changes as opportunities to learn at the grad school.	Pre	4.8	0.4
			Post	4.8	0.4
Trust	9	<i>If I have any doubts about learning process and activities at the grad school, I will step forward after resolving them.</i>	Pre	2.4	0.8
			Post	2.3	1.1
	10	I trust in the grad school as a place to obtain what I want.	Pre	4.4	0.7
			Post	4.5	0.5
	11	I have conviction that I can get something important through the learning activities at the grad school.	Pre	4.6	0.5
			Post	4.6	0.6
IT	12	I understand what operational skills I need to learn at the grad school.	Pre	3.3	0.9
			Post	3.8	1.0
	13	I think I need to acquire operational skills to carry out.	Pre	4.3	0.9
			Post	4.2	0.9
Attitude	14	I will understand and accept the learning environment at the grad school.	Pre	4.5	0.5
			Post	4.4	0.8
	15	I will try to understand and accept the curriculum of the grad school.	Pre	4.4	0.5
			Post	4.4	0.5
	16	I will try to accept my fellow students at the grad school.	Pre	4.4	0.5
			Post	4.8	0.4
Planning	17	<i>I have a clear goal to learn at the grad school.</i>	Pre	3.9	0.7
			Post	4.3	0.8
	18	I have a course plan (at least for the first year) at the grad school.	Pre	2.6	1.2
			Post	4.1	0.6
	19	I think I can make changes, as necessary.	Pre	3.6	0.9
			Post	3.9	0.7

Note. * $p < 0.5$, ** $p < 0.1$. *Italic*: The original item was in the reverse; the results have been converted.

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