

Are they ready?

Use of required orientations to help ensure online student success!

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BACKGROUND

As a student in 12 online classes (using three totally different learning management systems ... and three versions of one of those), it's been evident from my own struggles and those of my classmates that it's vital to have some sort of technical orientation in the use of the web course tools that you'll be using in class ... preferably before class starts ... in order to hit the ground running with learning on the first day or week of class.

I experienced one such orientation when I took an online class at UCLA Extension (OnlineLearning.net) in 1998 on "Distance Learning Assessment Theory." I liked that they required students to complete the orientation by the third day of class or else be dropped. But I put it off 5 days and found no feedback on that lapse, and when I took it, found it was more a boring and tedious waste of a lot of time than helpful. However, I saw the great potential in the idea .. and as I took more classes online, I saw the great need for well-designed orientations.

HELPING A PROFESSOR TEACH FROM THREE CONTINENTS

In Spring 2001, I again thought about this at an OSU Technology-Enhanced Learning & Research Awareness event while Dr. Timothy Gregory, a professor of History at Ohio State, was sharing insights on his experiences teaching his first entirely online course ... and his concerns about teaching that same course a year later (in Winter 2002) completely online while he was going to be on two other continents (while in Australia and Greece) during the entire quarter.

He spent much of the first two to three weeks answering students technical questions about how to access his web site and the course materials and tools within WebCT. Most of those students were stopping by his office – something that wasn't going to work too well a year later when he'd be 7 time zones ahead and an ocean apart.

So I asked him if he would be willing to help pilot a required orientation that would be offered online to students. I would build it and “coach” it the first time if he would take over the responsibility of facilitating it in the future and share with me his impressions of how well it helped students get over technical hurdles and jump into learning the content. He was quite eager to try anything that might make it so his students were prepared to use the web course tools by the first day of class and concentrate on learning the content ... and not have to spend too much of his time teaching or answering questions about the technology.

FIRST PILOT OFFERING (August/September 2001)

Requirements, Notice to Students:

On August 17, 2001, a message from the professor was sent by e-mail to all of the 42 students enrolled in History 505.01D for the Autumn quarter (that was to begin in about one month). Additionally, letters were sent by snail mail to both the permanent and current addresses listed for each student enrolled. They each contained a Welcome message from the professor that explained that the course would be taught entirely online and that they would be expected to learn how to use the web course tools before the first day of class, and that they were expected to log in to the course web site to do activities in collaborative groups at least three or four times a week most weeks. [Sample of letter available at <http://frontpage.telr.ohio-state.edu/orientation/welcome-letter1.html>] Additionally, there were login instructions telling them how to reach the “Orientation to Learning Online with WebCT” and a warning that they would be dropped from the class if they didn't successfully complete all the activities in the orientation by the end of the first day of class.

Features, activities:

Discussions. While constructing the first course activities, I thought it was important to try to start building community among the participants and increase their comfort level with sharing thoughts and ideas via the Discussions board. And I tried to make those activities fun – choosing their favorite “old” TV show and telling us a bit about their usual computer usage and amount of time per week they spend online. The “old” TV show choice was partly to see what generational differences and similarities emerged, help the students get to know one another better, and see who they have similar interests with. Another activity had them sharing an attachment – a picture or text file (containing something they found interesting – a poem, or something they wrote, whatever). Many of them began seeing the powerful potential of the asynchronous

communications tool. And in the evaluation given at the end of the orientation, these were two of the most popular activities.

Mail. Because some professors choose to have assignments submitted by WebCT Mail rather than using the confusing interface of the Assignments drop box, I had them take a message they'd received with an attachment, download that attachment, answer questions in the file, save it, and then make a reply using the Mail tool that then re-attached that attachment. It was a bit tricky for many of them (and some expressed frustration with the complexity of the task) but good practice – and it reportedly greatly reduced the problems the professor saw during the quarter compared to past quarters when students needed to do this. I also had them send a message to the instructor, myself, and six classmates to see how that worked.

Assignments drop box. For this activity, I had them visit a web page for our new Browser QuickCheck program that would determine what brand and version of web browser they were using and let them know if that was one that was compatible with WebCT and, if not, let them know which versions we recommend. It also determined whether they had enabled Java, JavaScript, and cookies. If not, it would tell them how to fix this. Soon the program will be updated to give those instructions in a customized way – showing just instructions and screenshots that are particular to that web browser brand (Internet Explorer vs. Navigator) and operating system (Windows vs. Macintosh), and only showing them the steps that are necessary to fix the one or two problems noticed and not having them go through anything more than necessary. We had a similar customized results screen to show students how to set their cache to be disabled to overcome problems with versions of WebCT below 3.5. We recently removed this as a check, though, now that we're using WebCT Campus Edition 3.6.3.

Content Tools. The content pages included are excerpts from the UVC 120 course at OSU on "Internet Tools & Research Techniques" used with permission of that instructor. At the same time they learn to navigate WebCT content pages using the Action Menu, they may learn a bit more about web tools.

Quiz. The quiz in the orientation seeks to do three things – find out what they know/don't know about use of WebCT, find out what they know/don't know about use of a web browser and other web tools, and help them self discover these things while also learning to become comfortable with use of the WebCT Quiz/Survey tool. It is set to give them instant feedback and they are allowed to take it as many times as they want – their most recent score being the one reported in their gradebook. Surprisingly, many students would retake this several times until they got a perfect score ... even though no real grades were being kept for this class. Taking the quiz once and getting any sort of score was all that was required. As they retook the class, they also found that they would get different questions each time for some of the questions as question sets with alternate questions were being utilized.

Chat. Demonstrating how a live chat tool works is pretty tough when you're having students access an orientation on an anytime basis. But I wanted them to get a feel for it. I made a link to the live chat log available so they could see what others had already said as a reply to the question, "What's your favorite pizza place?" And then asked them to log in to the Chat Room and post their own reply. This was the activity most often mentioned in the student evaluations as the least useful but I think it may have helped some of the students who weren't familiar with such a tool. And it's especially helpful in classes where students will work in collaborative groups where they need to have some synchronous chat to reach consensus when their asynchronous discussions have left them on different pages. This is perhaps more useful for graduate courses and those with more non-traditional students who are less likely to have experienced use of a chat tool.

Student Homepages. Some courses use this tool to help students get to know each other. Others use it to have students publicly post an assignment (and then have students provide feedback to a couple of their peers on these via the Discussions board).

My Grades. In the first Orientation, I made a grade column for every assignment and gave feedback to all the students on all the activities – usually “Completed,” “Completed Successfully,” “Attempted,” “Please try again,” or “Not yet Completed.” I would post a note saying what date and time the gradebook had last been updated. However, I found this incredibly time consuming (especially after the professor extended the deadline beyond the first day of class to be the end of the first week ... and beyond for a few students who added late). I even gave Overall progress reports with embedded images (some of them animated) – “Let’s get rolling” for those who had started but not gotten far, featuring a rolling smiley face; “Great job so far” with bouncing smiley; and for those slacking, no images, just a simple, “Never started,” “Missing ___ (one, two)” or “Missing too many.”

In later versions, to make it easier on whomever would coach the orientation, I explained to students on the homepage they would only be receiving feedback on certain activities. In My Grades, they would see the grade for their Quiz and, if the professor or TA coaching the orientation had time, they might also get a score and feedback on the Assignment submitted and some other activities. Instead, they were told that their professor would contact them if they did not attempt all of the activities or did not successfully complete enough of them in a timely manner. I think the high level of feedback I provided in the first offering was quite helpful and made people more likely to invest time in the activities. But, without a full-time TA to assist, it would be quite a burden on most professors to try to provide that level of involvement usually.

Tracking Footsteps. I used that name for the “My Progress” tool because, as in many classes, the data there doesn’t really reflect their amount of (or lack of) progress. But it does show them the sort of tracking information gathered as they move about and participate in Discussions (measuring their original postings, replies, and number of messages they clicked on to read). They could see how many page hits they made, the activity they had in Discussions, the number of Content Pages they visited, and (because of some special coding) when they visited the chat log, tracking page, and grades page (things that otherwise would have no tracking for the orientation coach to review).

My observations:

Students did quite well and jumped into the first activities quickly. I think it was helpful to start off with the Discussions and Mail activities because it gave them a chance to get to know each other while getting to know the tools. They were also some of the more fun activities. The professor reported they seemed much better prepared to use the course tools and more comfortable using Discussions than his past classes had.

When the Orientation announcements were sent out August 16, there were 27 students enrolled. By September 5, 17 students had completed all or most of the activities assigned (in the first orientation, I revealed only a few activities at a time as I was making adjustments along the way to upcoming activities based on how they were doing in the initial ones). There were eventually 43 students who were enrolled in the course and orientation at one time or another although 16 of them dropped (7 of them before the first day of class – September 19). Most of those who

dropped before the first day of class had never started the orientation. Three of those who dropped after the course started had already successfully finished the orientation. By first day of classes, most of the 37 students who remained enrolled had successfully completed the orientation. By the end of the second week of classes, 22 had successfully completed all the activities. Another 4 students completed all but one or two activities. About 4 students were dropped by the professor for failing to attempt the orientation activities.

Feedback from participants:

Students were asked to complete a brief online survey to evaluate the orientation and give us feedback on how we could improve it. There were 23 surveys submitted.

Findings:

100% (23) said the orientation was “**quite helpful.**” Of those, 43% strongly agreed with the statement “Overall, I found this Orientation to be quite helpful.”

87% (20) thought the **amount of time** required was “about right.” The other 13% (3) said “too much” time was required. “Far too much” was another choice provided

83% (19) found the **number of activities** required to be “about right.” The other 17% (4) said there were “too many” activities. “Far too many” was another choice provided.

96% (22) “think it’s a **good idea to require such an orientation** before having students take a course that is totally online.” And 61% (14 of the 22) strongly agreed. One person disagreed.

Activity found **least** useful (those mentioned more than once):

- Chat (6)
- “None” or “I thought they were all pretty good” or “I thought for me all was useful” (5)
- Student Homepage (3)
- Tracking (2)
- Content (2)

Activity found **most** useful

(those mentioned more than once are listed; some chose more than one):

- Assignment drop box (6)
- Mail (5)
- Attachments transfer in Mail, Discussions (4)
- Quiz (4)
- Discussions (3)
- “All” (2) – one said “All, each one helped even an expert like me” and the other said, “All were useful.”

When asked what they “**disliked** and how the orientation could be **improved,**” answers included:

- “I think the orientation was fine. My web browser needs updating, however.”
- “I think it is good to have an orientation. However, I think it is strange and possibly unreasonable to require ANYTHING to be completed before class begins. Instead I would recommend that you have the assignment due by the first Friday of class.”

- “Good job. I liked it.”
- “I think that all the activities are very good.”
- “There wasn’t really anything that I disliked.” (2 others said “nothing”)
- Three mentioned issues with the Quiz – either not thinking its questions were relevant, that the answers should have been revealed in content BEFORE they took it, or that some of the questions were “tricky.” [I had chosen to reveal the content afterward this time because I mostly wanted a pre-test of their web & web tools knowledge.]
- “I disliked how much time I had to spend on my assignments before classes began. The weeks before school starts are my busiest, and I found some of these assignments to be very time consuming, and not incredibly helpful.”
- “I felt like I didn’t get a quarter break. Trying to compact the amount of time spent would be helpful. Send the first e-mail from Dr. Gregory after finals week of Summer 01. I was juggling both the orientation for this course and the end of my summer quarter class at the same time.”
- “I thought it was very helpful. I have only had my computer a while and the exercises we did were a very effective way to get me on it and used to it.”
- “I cannot say that there was much I disliked about this orientation. I sometimes get ahead of myself when working with computers, but I corralled my enthusiasm enough to follow directions closely. I thought that this orientation showed a good deal of thought in layout, design and overall content.”

When asked, for “other **comments** and **suggestions**,” answers included:

- “I feel a lot more comfortable with WebCT because of this orientation.”
- “I am looking forward to a new learning experience.”
- “Thanks so much for doing this ... hopefully, I know what I need to but you were such a help.”
- “It was a great experience so far and I am eager to get started!”
- “This is the first time in all y Internet courses that I had to do these activities and I think it would have helped in my first class.”
- “Great job!”
- “I still don’t understand what the point of Quiz #1 was ... (?????)”
- “All in all, pretty good assignment.”
- “I really have no problems with the orientation.”
- “Thanks, this course will be fun.”
- “I can’t wait for class to begin.”
- “I dunno if it is just me, but the main page for the course is not the easiest to navigate.”
- “I thought that this orientation showed a good deal of thought in layout, design and overall content.”

For the rest of the comments made for the last two questions (dislikes, how it could be improved, and other comments and suggestions) , you can visit

<http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientationcourseshare>

and go to the “Survey results” section.

Professor's insights on impact of the orientations on his two online courses

Professor Timothy E. Gregory had these comments on the usefulness of the Orientation (comments made on February 17, 20002 – after midterms graded for the second quarter in which he used the Orientation to prepare a totally online class; he's teaching his current course while in Greece at the excavations site he oversees ... and later while he'll be in Australia):

“My own experience with the orientations are anecdotal, but I think they are sound. I saw the greatest difference between my course in Winter 2001, when I did not have the orientation, and Autumn 2001, when the orientation was in place. In the first instance I had continuous problems with students who were unfamiliar with basic computer operations (and who probably would have dropped the course immediately after starting the orientation); even among those who were computer-literate there were difficulties with many of the tools of WebCT. Students sent assignments to me through my regular e-mail account, then barraged me with questions, and many came by my office (and even my home) in attempts to deal with basic issues concerning WebCT.”

“One of the results of this was a noticeable degree of student discontent and a drop-rate that continued through the course. In the Autumn of 2001 these problems were minimized. Some students continued to have problems with WebCT, but these were relatively few in number and some of them were inherent to WebCT and human error and were probably about the same number of problems one would encounter in a regular classroom-offering (ill grandmothers, late submissions, errors on my part, etc.).

“I note some improvement in the class I am currently teaching (Winter 2002), again with the orientation in place, but this may partly be due to the fact that I have a reasonable number of students who are continuing from the previous quarter and are thus familiar with WebCT. One difficulty I note is that Tom Stone kindly agreed to monitor the orientation the first time it was offered, providing students with feedback, corrections, hints, etc. This quarter, I attempted to monitor the orientation myself, and I was not very good at doing so. The reason simply is that some students began using the orientation about a month before the class began, while others were working on it two weeks or so into the term. The amount of feedback and control necessary to get the most out of the orientation amounted to another course--something that most instructors are normally not able to provide. Presumably, more automated feedback and response will facilitate this matter considerably. In any case, I find the orientations a useful, and even necessary, preparation for an online course, and I intend to continue to require them of students.”

Changes made in design, activities (based on feedback, etc.)

Around midterm week in Autumn 2001, I began creating Beta Version 2 of the Orientation. I began by looking at a list of changes recommended by students as well as notes I'd taken from answering student questions (about things that confused them – the tools, the instructions, or the design of the orientation). A major intent was to make it easier for others (professors, TAs and staff) to coach and facilitate the orientation with whatever level of involvement they were comfortable. Some of the original activities were somewhat specific to students taking a history course so I redesigned them to be more generic as more professors had expressed interest in using the orientation for their courses in various disciplines. One of the most difficult problems I'd created for myself in the original version was an assignment where I sent all the students in the class an e-mail message with an attachment and then asked them to download that attachment and

answer questions in it and then mail that back to me. But 16 students added the course after the original roster loading. Each week (and later, every few days), I had to see who had added the course (and been added automatically by our automated WebCT roster-loading system) and send them another copy of this mail with the attachment. In the redesign, I now have them access the attachment in a Discussion posting but Reply Privately via WebCT Mail to send back the revised attachment. This removed the need for additional set up of the orientation materials.

The biggest change made for students' benefit was the homepage layout and the way they accessed the instructions and tools. Through the use of some special JavaScript coding that would sense the screen size of the user that just logged in and then let them click two buttons – one that would resize the main screen to use about two-thirds of the screen, and another that would launch and size the instructions window in the remaining third of the screen. Navigation was added to the instructions to make it easier to move about from one to the other. The homepage was condensed and redesigned so that on most screens all tools would be visible without scrolling (even when resized to two-thirds). The first design required lots of scrolling to see all the tools and links to instructions (each activity's instructions a separate link on the homepage in the first design). Radical changes to the homepage interface were partly to address my own discontent with its look and also to address a student remark: "I dunno if it is just me, but the main page for the course is not the easiest to navigate." The creation of the resize and instruction window launch tool was made because of comments a few students had made to me during the first few weeks of their efforts. Some said they had trouble remembering the instructions after reading them and then going to use the tool. Apparently, they weren't resizing the two windows and keeping them side-by-side. As an interim step, I had added a Compile tool to make it easier to print out all of the instructions in advance (for those who wanted that).

More classes begin using using orientation (December 2001/January 2002)

Professor Gregory used the orientation again for his History 505.02D class (as he mentioned earlier). In that class, some of the same students from History 505.01D were enrolled and some still participated in the new version of the orientation although not required to do so. Additionally, Professor Dave Dickinson in Welding Engineering utilized the orientation informally for his 300 and 640 classes. An English course also is making partial use of the orientation.

Latest feedback

For the Winter 2002 class of History 505.02D, there were even more students – of the 73 enrolled, 21 dropped. But only 10 completed the survey (and some did not answer all questions).

Findings were similar to first (but not as many strong positives and higher percentage saying too much time was required). In this case, there was much less discussion back and forth between coach and students or between students (replying to each other as had happened in first offering ... when most students were on summer break as opposed to over a holiday break this time with less free time perhaps).

In Winter 2002 Orientation for History 505.02D:

100% (9 out of 9 answering) said the orientation was "quite helpful" with 22% (2) of those strongly agreeing.

67% (6) said the amount of time required was “about right” and 33% (3) said “too much” time was required.

89% (8) said number of activities required was “about right” and 11% (1) said there were too many activities.

100% (9) either agreed (5) or strongly agreed (4) with the statement: “I think it’s a good idea to require such an orientation before having students take a course that is totally online.”

Comments:

- “I think you guys did a great job. I have taken online courses before so it was no big deal to me but it’s all good. Keep up the good work.”
- “I think that for people who don’t have much experience with computers, the orientation seems a little overwhelming. For me, since I am a bit of a perfectionist, I agonized a little bit over reading every little thing and making sure I got everything right, so it took me a long time. But I do think that the orientation was helpful and probably much needed, so I’m not sure how it could be improved or shortened much from what it already is.”
- “Some of the instructions were vague at times.”
- “I didn’t really dislike anything. Everything was easy to follow.”
- “I was just annoyed that I wa required to do it. Most people can operate a computer for the stuff required by this class. People who do not know much about computers wouldn’t even sign up for a web-class in the first place.”
- “I think this is a very interesting way to take a class. It definitely beats trying to get up and go in the morning. I love the flexibility.”
- I definitely think that this was a useful tool, and I will probably come back to it later to remind myself of certain things I forgot. I also thought that, for the most part, the step by step instructions were very helpful to people who don’t use computers much, and I think it is good that the orientation assumes that its users don’t know a lot about computers (or assumes that even if a person can use a computer fairly well, that they don’t know exact terms, locations of information, etc.)”
- “I enjoyed it.”

In the Welding Engineering classes, only 5 surveys were submitted in the WE 300 class and 2 were submitted in the WE 640 class. Results were somewhat similar.

More details on the most recent survey results can be found at: <http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientationcourseshare> under “Survey results.”

More changes in works

For the next version of the orientation, I hope to continue improving the instructions and making the activities more enjoyable (making them consume less time ... or at least seem that way). I’m also going to look at removing some of the activities that might be asking them to do the same thing more than once. I’d like to provide more automated feedback about their successful completion of some of the activities but that may not be possible or feasible until we move to the new WebCT Vista edition built on an Oracle database and enabling more such customizations and automations. ALN.org at Vanderbilt University had such an automatic “homework checker.”

The student interface was my focus in last revision. For now, I'm concentrating on simplifying the interface for the Coach. It hasn't been built in a way that is easy for most faculty to edit. Its homepage is not currently built using typical organizer page tools. And I'd like to make it easy for faculty to customize -- choosing which orientation activities are included and only include the tools necessary (using selective release or hide feature and removal of Activity #s).

I'm hoping that as more faculty use the orientation, there will be more input about alternate activities that can be included. Eventually I hope to make customizing the orientation as easy as choosing from a menu of options with checkmarks. But that will require WebCT to change first.

Your turn

Try it out. To try out the orientation as a student, you can go to <http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientation> and create a guest login. At another WebCT site (our Forum/Workspace), <http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientationcourseshare>, I'll have a discussion forum where you can provide feedback and suggestions..

Open Source. If you would like to use the orientation at your Ohio campus as it currently exists, please feel free to do so. Or, better yet, take it and change it to improve upon it and customize it so that it better meets your students' specific needs. I have put a WebCT backup of the orientation on a web site for you to download. It's at <http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientationcourseshare>.

I would greatly appreciate you sharing with us any comments and suggestions you or your students have. A discussion forum will be on that same site so you can give us feedback that you and they have.

CourseShare Challenge. I think the best way for this orientation to evolve is to make it openly available to anyone in Ohio who would like to use it and/or continue developing it. All I ask is that you visit the discussion forum I've set up for faculty and staff who are utilizing this orientation (or a variation of it) and share comments you and your students have as well as suggestions on how to make it better so we can all benefit from your experiences and insights.

Forum, Workspace to discuss, share orientation design ideas, templates. You don't have to share anything in return. But, to truly become a co-developer in the open CourseShare spirit, you would take the course, make your improvements/changes, and then upload the revised backup to our collaborative workspace at <http://courses3.telr.ohio-state.edu/public/orientationcourseshare> to share with everyone. (Or you could at least provide a guest login and the URL to your version of the orientation so we can take a look at what you've done with it.)

If this goes well, we'll have a nice gallery of variations on this orientation by the end of this year thanks to this collaborative effort. I especially hope we'll have an extensive collection of ideas and insights contributed by a large number of faculty and staff around Ohio about what would make such an orientation more fun, more effective, and easier to coach or customize.

Helping online distance courses realize their potential is closely tied to our first helping online students become proficient at using the web course tools they will rely upon in their new learning environment. I hope our sharing of ideas, strategies, and experiences about how to help them get ready to learn online will help more students find online learning success.