Designing Orientation for a New Audience and Learning Environment:
Moving the College Experience Course Online

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Retention has become a priority for Rogers State University (RSU) as it has recently changed from a community college to a four-year university. RSU, like many colleges and universities, implemented the College Experience course to orient all incoming freshman students to college life and give them the critical skills for academic success and survival. This one-hour course is a requirement in all degree programs for incoming freshmen, and because RSU offers seven complete degree programs online, the course was prepared to be put into an online format. The purpose of the current study was to describe the process for transitioning the course, describe and discuss the characteristics of the RSU online learners, and the effects the transition has had on the course content.

For most students, the first-year of college holds many new and life-changing experiences. Brower (1990) described seven life-tasks for most first-year students: Making friends, getting good grades, establishing future goals, managing time, being alone without family and friends, establishing an identity, and maintaining physical self. These goals were primarily identified for traditional age first-year students, in an on-campus course of studies. As such, the RSU College Experience was designed and launched with two pilot sections in the spring of 2001 to respond to these traditional students. The online version of the same course was to be launched the following fall semester. The purpose of the orientation course, whether online or on campus, was to introduce new students to the skills, attitudes and knowledge they need for success in completing a degree, thus highlighting the academic skills necessary for success in the classroom.

Course Development Process

The development process for adapting the College Experience course for online delivery began a semester prior to its delivery. RSU makes use of a faculty centered course development process in which the faculty member(s) develops the content with the assistance of an instructional designer, who provides not only pedagogical knowledge and online expertise but also creates web pages and graphics for the course. The faculty member does the majority of the content development work and the instructional designer serves as a consultant. In the development of the College Experience Online (CEO), the instructional designer and the faculty member began by creating a list of tasks and assigning them to a timeline. Regular meetings were

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scheduled once a week to review progress and discuss further steps. The faculty member, who was teaching an on campus section of the course at the time, reflected on her experience in the on-campus pilot course and used that experience to inform the development of the online section.

In keeping with a traditional model of instructional design, including analysis, design, develop, implement, evaluate (Dick & Carey 1996; Smith & Ragan 1999), the initial tasks were to analyze the target population, the learning context, and the learning tasks. Analyzing these different areas proved to be an important part of the process; as Dick and Carey (1996) pointed out, the analysis of the learner and learning context "help shape both what is taught and, especially, how it is taught" (p.89).

Who Were the Online Learners?

Although it is difficult, at best, to predict precisely which students will enroll in any course, that is pertaining to their cognitive, physiological, affective, and social characteristics, RSU and the CEO developing team wanted to have a general profile based on enrollment and demographic data. Previously, online students had been a significant proportion of RSU enrollment, and had been one of the fastest growing segments of the RSU student population, with a growth rate of 50% from fall 2000 (828) to fall 2001 (1245). First, the design team analyzed demographic data of these online students to determine how they differed from on campus students for whom the original orientation course was designed. Specifically, the design team focused on which of the seven life-tasks (Bower, 1990) an online orientation course could or perhaps should address.

The analysis of the learner demographic data revealed a notable difference in the age distribution between online students and non-online students. Of the two groups, non-online students were primarily 25 years of age or younger (67%) while online students tended to be older than 25 years of age (61%). This characteristic has been noted in the literature as typical of distance learners (Moore & Kearsley 1996). Stratifying the ages into smaller categories, the design team found the distribution of online students was somewhat evenly distributed across all age groups, with a slight positive tendency, while the distribution of traditional on campus students was positively skewed (see Table 1).

The majority of online students were enrolled on a part-time basis (FT=33%; PT=67%), while the majority of non-online students were enrolled full time (FT=56%; PT=44%). The difference in the two groups was used as a rationale for the inclusion of topics that related to students across their life span.

The final characteristic of the online students that emerged was that RSU students in general were almost two thirds (63%) female, consistent with the 66% of online students who were female. The large percentage of female students continued a trend of adult women seeking educational opportunities in greater numbers than men (Rice & Meyer 1989), "the continuing decline in the population of college and university students aged eighteen to twenty-four years has been significantly offset by the increased participation

of older women students" (p. 550).

Therefore, the course development team identified two characteristics that had direct design implications. First, based on the overall online population, it was assumed that enrollment in this course would include a range of ages, but the majority of the learners would be 25 years of age or older. Thus, the needs, perceptions, and dispositions of the non-traditional college student, the 30-something female with a family and job outside the home would have to be considered and addressed in the CEO.

Second, the design team determined that students enrolling in the online orientation course would be taking a number of courses online, perhaps pursuing an online degree program, and therefore need to be prepared for continued online learning. Most new college students (traditional and non-traditional) have been unfamiliar with the online learning context, and the skills and resources necessary to be successful in that environment. Addressing these concerns helped to develop and fine-tune the learning goals and objectives for the course.

What Content Was Needed?

A faculty committee established the syllabus, course objectives and text for the on campus College Experience course. The CEO team developed learning tasks within the online setting began with establishing course goals and objectives. The on-campus course addressed these objectives by covering the following topics: time management, testing skills, library skills and use, reading skills, class skills, critical thinking, writing, active learning and learning styles, career choice, campus life, relationships, and diversity, and stress management.

The original learning goals of the College Experience course assumed that the incoming student would be enrolled in a face-to-face class on the main campus and would have little or no previous college experience. The online learner analysis revealed a different population; therefore, the course was adapted along with the learning goals to take into consideration adult learners with some college courses and work experiences, possible families and multiple roles. Students older than 25 years of age typically function primarily in other roles, such as employee, spouse, or parent, while their role as student is secondary (for further reading on adult stages of development and learning, see Baltes & Schaie, 1973; Sheehy, 1974; Gould 1978; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam 1982). Some orientation course topics were specific to students who had recently graduated from high school and were living away from home for the first time and were experiencing the life changes of new adulthood. Many of the existing orientation topics were relevant to all age groups, but some of the content needed to be modified to include examples and scenarios that incorporate situations faced by adults.

Thus, a primary task as a design team was to examine the learning goals carefully and adapt them to the online context and online learners. Each of the learning goals and objectives were examined carefully, questioning whether the objective fit the scope of the online learning environment and would benefit the learners. While adapting some objectives, other objectives did not fit the scope of the online learning context and

learners, and additional learning objectives would have to be developed to specifically address the online environment and learners.

Many objectives seemed to fall into three general categories: those that were applicable to all learners and learning contexts and therefore needed little adaptation (critical thinking, learning styles, and test-taking); objectives that had to be adapted because of their increased importance in the online learning environment (such as stress management, reading and writing skills, library skills and time management); and objectives that had to be drastically revised or even eliminated because of diminished relevance to the online environment and learners (campus life, career choices, and dating). The design team concluded that objectives focusing on campus life, relationship issues such as dating and sex, and diversity were not applicable to many online learners or the online learning environment. To a large extent, the more mature adult learner has already dealt with many of these issues, and in the online learning context, race, ethnicity, gender and age are less apparent. Inappropriate and misunderstood communications are more common due to the lack of visual cues in the communication act and carelessness of the writer. Diversity in the online classroom is more appropriately addressed by focusing on communication protocol and etiquette.

The design team struggled to prioritize content due to the one-hour credit limit and found it necessary to eliminate many valuable subjects and had to change the order of some topics. In the online context certain issues needed to be addressed immediately; for example, active learning is critical to success in online learning, possibly more than in traditional classes due to the absence of face-to-face contact with instructors and peers and the lack of a scheduled class time. Students are more independent and face new types of distractions to their learning. In addition, many of these students would be new to online learning, so lessons on computer and Internet skills were incorporated into the initial module. Also, while time management is an important skill in any learning context, it is critical in the online environment. Successful online learners manage their time carefully, setting aside blocks of time for study even though there is no set class time. Addressing time management objectives early in the course was critical due to the learning context. The focus of the library unit was also changed, choosing to focus on topics such as locating and utilizing online library resources and databases and how to use the Internet for research.

The resulting objectives of the online version of College Experience were:

• *Technical Skills*

    Identify what hardware and software is needed to be successful.

    Demonstrate how to navigate the e-College system (access course information, contact the helpdesk, etc.)

    Identify what are best practices in e-mail and How do you attach documents in Rich text or html formats?

    Demonstrate how to do an advanced search, keyword search, etc.

- *Learning Online*
    Demonstrate how to use databases for effective research
    Identify legal issues surrounding the use of information
    Identify how the expectations are different for online vs. traditional students?
    Define active learning and how it affects the student in terms of performance
        expectations?

- *Time Management*
    Demonstrate how to set up a daily, weekly, and monthly schedule
    Demonstrate how to set time priorities

- *Learning Styles and Critical Thinking*
    Identify and discuss how to use critical thinking to manage your time
    Identify and discuss how to identify your learning style
    Identify and discuss how your personality affects your learning style
    Identify and discuss how your learning style will affect comprehension

- *Taking Tests*
    Identify what is considered cheating
    Determine techniques you need to do to successfully prepare for your exams
        such as how to develop a study plan and memory techniques

- *Stress Management*
    Determine the difference between good stress and bad stress
    Determine ways to identify and cope with the bad stress in your life
    Identify ways rest, exercise, and a healthy diet can help you combat stress

- *Reading and Writing Skills*
    Determine how you can use critical thinking to improve your writing
    Determine what habits can you eliminate or nurture to improve your writing
        skills
    Determine what can you do to get more out of what you read

Implementation and Review

The course was taught during the first twelve weeks of the fall semester in 2001, with 39 students enrolled. In the eighth week, or two-thirds of the way through the twelve-week course, the design team issued a questionnaire. Twenty-nine of the 39 students in the CEO course responded to the survey, with the following results.

The survey revealed that 71.4% were female, a number almost 10% higher than the percentage of females in the student body as a whole. The majority of the respondents were white (75%). Of all online students, 42.9% are between 18 and 24 years of age and

57.1% were above 25 years of age. The majority (58.6%) reported working at least 30 hours a week in a job outside of the home. Also of interest, most of the 29 respondents rated themselves at least intermediate computer users with 11 claiming they are advanced or expert users. While not an accurate measure of technical skill, this question revealed that these students did not believe they were beginners in computer use. The majority (72.4%), however, had not previously completed an online course. Only 10 of the students had not taken any college courses previously, while 17 (65.5%) had some college. The typical student in this course appeared to be a white, female between 25 and 35 with some college and some technical skills, and a job that required at least 30 hours of work a week. This was her first online course and she could come to campus to take the course but it would be inconvenient.

After reviewing the data, the design team concluded that the preliminary assumptions regarding students were met and that adequate choices for the content in the online course were appropriate. There were, however, several issues identified that will require further consideration. As the course adaptation process is ongoing; future issues to be addressed include:

- Reviewing the number of credit hours needed to adequately meet the needs of the online learner.
- Identifying and including topics and activities related to older learners that impact their success.
- Providing more examples and illustrations within existing topics that are more relevant to the adult learner.
- Given the female population at RSU, include content that addresses gender-specific issues, such as childcare, balancing work, family and school.
- Incorporating content related to distance learning options into campus orientation curriculum.
- Providing faculty development on the needs and characteristics of adult learners.
- Reviewing and revising the technical/Internet skills unit to allow the technically competent learner to "test out"

Conclusions and Recommendations

The mature group of online learners functions primarily in roles of employee, parent and spouse and secondarily as a student, resulting in, a higher value being placed on life related responsibilities than on achieving a high grade in a class. Skills in setting priorities and scheduling time to study are important regardless of the learner's age, but the demands on an adult learner's time come from high priority sources that cannot be ignored. While the skills may be the same, some of the examples and illustrations used in instruction should be relevant to the adult learner. Worth noting is that adult learners typically participate in formal learning experiences based on a real-life need, and they prefer (and sometimes demand) that content be relevant (Knowles, 1970). While the

design team was constrained by the one-hour credit in the number of topics covered, it is recommended that topics in online orientation course focus on many of the issues mentioned above in order to address holistically the transition that older online students are making when embarking on a college education. Also, it is hoped that orientation courses will begin to reflect the changing face of the online student population by including topics focused on the needs of women.

While it remains to be seen if the modification of the College Experience course to online delivery positively affects retention, the careful analysis and development process resulted in an orientation experience that more carefully addressed the needs of the online learner. Through this process, it became clear that changing the mode of delivery did require a revision to the course content.

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TABLE 1

Age Distribution of Online & Not-Online Enrollees, Fall 01

Online/Overall Enrollment by Age Fall 01

age	Overall/ not online	Online	%not online	% online
< 21	965	93	43%	15%
21-25	534	155	24%	25%
26-30	242	132	11%	21%
31-35	144	88	6%	14%
36-40	123	72	6%	11%
> 40	215	89	10%	14%
Totals	**2223**	**629**		