



Orienting Your Online Learners: Final Assessment

Question 1

The institution for which you're teaching online is developing an orientation to online learning, and you've been asked to serve on the planning committee. Each committee member has been asked to make recommendations on the following items:

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

What would your recommendations be, and why?

What to include in the orientation – First of all, I would recommend to the committee that we should focus on common elements that are likely to be identical across all online courses the institution offers. Making a list of the “common elements” may be a good starting point. Based on my experience with real-world scenarios, the confusion between orientation to online learning vs. to online course is quite common. Most likely the elements considered would include: 1) resources on becoming a successful online learner, perhaps even with a checklist or rubric; 2) instructions on how to access the courses with a link to the main log-in page – this section should also include orientation to the LMS system used by the institution and how-to information for common tasks (how to post to a discussion; how to check your grades/progress, etc.); 3) if a common course template is used at the institution, then an overview of elements or structure of the course that are always included (otherwise, this information belong in the course orientation); 4) minimum technology requirements, including both hardware requirements, and a list of computer / technical skills that are required to be successful; 5) institutional policies (student privacy / FERPA, plagiarism policies),and netiquette expectations, including tone, academic vs spoken style, tactfulness and civil tone, especially in response to views that differ from one's own; 6) information about learner campus resources and services (libraries, advising & support services, center for students with disabilities).

How to conduct the orientation? Based on my personal experience with successful student orientation where I currently work, I would advocate for a video-based orientation that includes a readiness check. Students would be review online materials and videos, and would be expected to take a “readiness quiz” – a simple, multiple-choice quiz that tests for recall of key information.

Optional or required? I would strongly advocate for a flexible approach: required of all students, but allowing them to “test out” of elements of the orientation / topics with which they may be familiar. For example, if a student is already familiar with the specific LMS system used on campus, there is no need for them to watch the videos on how to post to discussion or check

their grades, especially if they can answer a few quick questions that confirm their satisfactory skill level in their area / on this topic.

Why? Required orientation maximizes the chances for success. It minimizes the chances that students will somehow fail due to complexities of the system or inadequate access to technology. It also makes sure that both students and faculty can focus on teaching & learning, rather than spend time on resolving administrative issues, or troubleshooting technical problems.

Question 2

After a few months of planning, the orientation to online learning is developed and ready to be launched. The committee chair wants to emphasize the importance of the orientation in the communication that's being sent to the learners, and has asked you to write a "statement of importance" that explains why it's important for learners to take the orientation to online learning. What would you write?

A few important points before I propose the actual message - I would use a system that allows personalization of the message – there are many inexpensive and very effective technology solutions available now that can do this (at my institution we use MailChimp). I would carefully consider who the letter should come from – if this is institution-wide effort, depending on the administrative structure, a message from the Chancellor, Provost, or Dean of Students / First-Year Experience would be appropriate. I'd also make sure to include the mention of success rate – existing research shows that direct, informal address, as well as making people aware that majority of their peers have done something is a good incentive that improves outcomes by a statistically significant margin. I think this should be short, and the message should be simple.

Here is my proposed message:

Dear [FIRST NAME],

On behalf of faculty and staff at Perfect University, I want to welcome you– we are glad to have you join our campus community. PU is dedicated to offering you access to high-quality online education that is intellectually stimulating and challenging, and designed to prepare you well for the future.

Soon, on [COURSE START DATE], you will be starting your first course, [COURSE TITLE]. Before you do, we'd like you to complete the online orientation. The orientation is designed to help you get a clear picture of how online courses work at PU, and to ensure you know how make the most of all the resources available to you. An overwhelming majority (97%) of our students tell us that completing this orientation before taking their first PU course made them more confident, and helped them succeed [NOTE: these have to be real numbers, based on real data – not made up wishful thinking stuff, someone will ALWAYS ask where this number came from, and request the data].

Completing the orientation should take you less than 90 minutes, and is done completely online. You will need to complete all 10 modules, each with a minimum passing score of 80%. The orientation is now open to you at: www.pu.edu/orientation , and we ask you to complete it

before your first course start date (we will email you a reminder, if you have not completed it a week before the course starts). You must complete the orientation before you can enter the course. If you need assistance please contact orientationassistance@pu.edu or call (PHONE #).

We are thrilled to have you here, and committed to helping you succeed.
(signed by the appropriate campus official)

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?

I'd agree with Theresa that the information that is common to all courses at our University should not be repeated in every course intro – it's a waste of time, and encourages students to skip, skim, and mostly ignore some really important information. Students do need to know how to use the LMS, what computer to buy, how to post to class discussion, and so all this common information (from the list in Question 1) should be provided in one, common orientation for all learners, and not in her course, to save time.

But then, I'd make sure Theresa understands that she most likely has things she does her own way in her course, and these things may be very different from how I handle them in my course: does she have a common deadline for all assignment submissions (mine is always 11:59 PM)? Does she limit the amount students write for each assignment (I do, it's usually 300-500 words)? How often does she expect students to post to online discussion – is once a week enough? I'd give Theresa a few more examples of areas when her and my approach may differ (Is informal language in posts OK? Can two students collaborate on, or proofread each other's assignments? Can they ask campus writing center to help them edit the final paper?), and stress how confusing these things would be to a student who is taking three courses, with three different instructors, without each of them taking the time to cover at least these important basics. I would also stress that covering all these important points in the course orientation typically reduces the number of repetitive questions the instructor must answer at the beginning of the semester, saving significant amount of time for instructors, and making overall learning experience better for students. Finally, I'd try to persuade her to simply ask students at the end of the course (via an online survey) what information was useful to them, and what was superfluous. She could then fine-tune her orientation with that info in mind. Last, but not least, if Theresa or her institution should consider QM course review, she would be much closer to meeting QM standards during the course review.

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?

Theresa should include all the information that is **NOT** already included in the common orientation students complete, and especially:

- Course Catalog Information: Course title, brief description, and objectives or competencies; course pre-requisites, and special classification info (for example, this course satisfies undergrad science course with a lab general ed requirement);
- information about important dates and timelines (when will the course start and end; when are specific assignments due; which dates/times cannot be missed without serious consequences);
- grading policies and criteria, and the composition of the overall grade (weights of different elements, like quizzes = 25%), and related issues (missed quiz or exam policies, make up exam or quiz policies, late assignment policies);
- interaction requirements: how frequently to log-in, post, reply, timeframes for doing this;
- instructions on what to do first / where to start, once students enter the course;
- info about any required and recommended course resources, with a clear distinction between the two (textbooks, films/videos, software, lab supplies, online database access, etc.);
- a self-introduction by the instructor(s), including: name, title, area of expertise, how to address them (unless the institution has a clear policy, which some do), contact information and preferred contact mode and best times to reach, as well as expectations for reply turn-around and times, information about others involved in the teaching of the course (TAs, support staff).
- structure of the course (if different from a department or admin unit template, or if there is no template)
- information about, and links to relevant campus resources, policies, and services.

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