

Online Orientation Redesign Incorporates Web 2.0 Technologies and the Affective Domain

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Abstract: The Loretto Heights School of Nursing recently revamped the online orientation. The redesign included an interactive tutorial in Adobe Presenter, and a format consistent with other courses in the program. In addition to addressing the tools of the learning management system and how the online classroom works, the orientation also promotes establishing informal communities--the human side of learning.

Informal communities are often a natural occurrence in face-to-face (f2f) courses, but can be a greater challenge for online students who are more likely to feel isolated and alone. A “getting to know you” exercise was created using a wiki—students could edit and build on a list of characteristics, or add their own comments. New social media tools such as this wiki provide a fun way to promote the informal networks that can contribute to student satisfaction, persistence, and learning beyond formal assignments.

Introduction

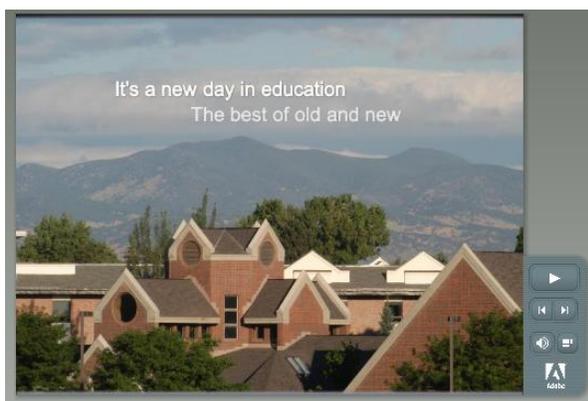
The Loretto Heights School of Nursing in the Rueckert-Hartman College for Health Professions at Regis University in Denver, Colorado, currently serves approximately 1400 online nursing students. Our students are practicing nurses completing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing or a Master of Science (Nursing) with a focus in education or management. Students are from all over the United States, and vary in age, culture, work experience, and computer savvy. While such diversity enhances the online environment, this also brings challenges to the student, particularly those that are introverted and/or computer novices.

Starting Students off Right

Our online nursing program was already utilizing an orientation that included an introduction to the technical aspects of the ANGEL learning management system (LMS), and a moderator that participated in the discussion forum to welcome the students, model how online dialogue works, and answer questions. None-the-less, anxious students were left to navigate the site with some tutorials created using Word documents and SnagIt to illustrate and outline steps to using the LMS. It wasn't a good first impression of what our online environment is like--it was confusing, flat, and ended up causing doubt and frustration. Students complained that they didn't know where to start in the LMS, and instructors noted that students in the first course still had problems navigating the site and using the tools.

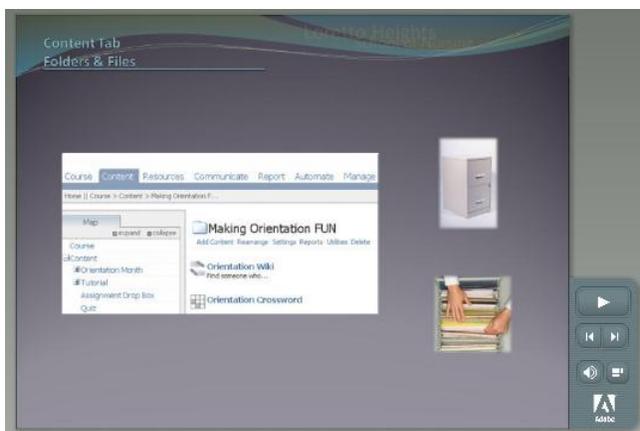
We wanted our orientation to better reflect the quality of our curriculum and the Regis online learning environment, including a design to promote informal network formation. Our curriculum and course structure are increasingly integrating Web 2.0 technologies and there was a recognized need for our orientation for new students to move in that same direction.

Our approach included a format identical to the courses (i.e., syllabus, resources learning activities, and assignments), and the tutorial was enhanced using Adobe Presenter embedded in the course. To entice the student to continue into the orientation, the tutorial begins with animated images from campus that move the student from familiar views of education to those of an online environment:





The music of Vivaldi also accompanied these slides to stimulate the brain in preparation for the tutorial. A voice over was provided with the duration of the tutorial to help guide the student through the steps, though no text on the slide was “read” to the student. Analogies were provided with animated graphics and text to help the student attach new meaning to what was already understood; for example, the folders in the course relate to the folders in a file cabinet with files inside the drawer:

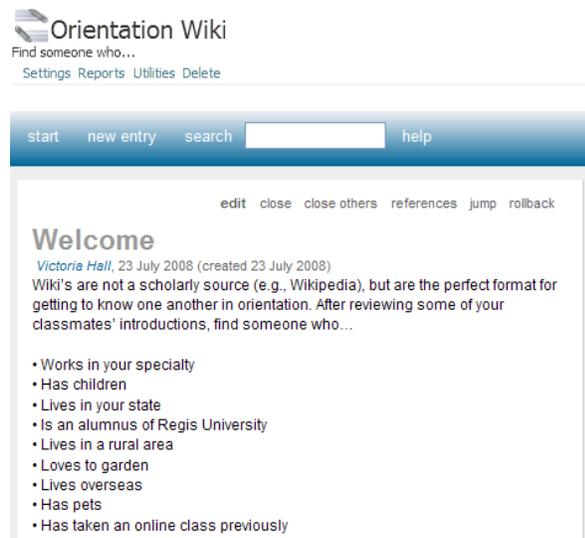


In addition, the tutorial included the traditional steps for using the course tools, e.g., course mail and the discussion forum. Practice slides were also included to get the student away from the tutorial and engage with the format of the course; for example, after the appropriate slides, students were encouraged to click on the tabs and breadcrumbs, take a practice quiz, submit a practice document to the assignment dropbox, and post in the discussion forum.

It was important to create a tutorial to help the student navigate the site in an engaging fashion, though our team also sought to promote the formation of informal communities. Though formal strategies such as group projects are designed to promote community in the online classroom, they often create more stress for the student and alienation from peers. Unlike forced activities resulting in a grade, informal communities are voluntary. Many students—current and past—attest to the value of a friend(s) they can not only count on to brainstorm on assignments and course content, but also provide and receive emotional support and caring. Students in the online environment are more likely than campus-based students to feel isolated, which on a national level often leads to increased attrition and decreased retention. In addition, studies

indicate the formal classroom is just one way learning occurs; informal networks nurture the affective domain promoting learning of the whole person.

One method to address this need included an optional “getting to know you” exercise to promote informal communities by using a wiki—students could edit and build on a list of characteristics, or add their own comments.



This encouraged students to search for other students they could relate to. Comments from students included:

- *Most all of us have children, but Kathleen. has 2 children as do I and both her youngest and my youngest have just started college.*
- *I presently have 4 dogs, 4 cats and 2 horses....I noticed that Shirley. has 3 dogs, Angela has 2 dogs, Michele has 4 cats and Sandy has one large cat named BUSTER*
- *George just recently relocated from the east coast to the west coast....bet that has taken some adjustment!*
- *Kathy and Kevin both work in ED's like I do*

This type activity provides a foundation for connecting with others—doing so in an orientation with 80 other students increases the chance of students establishing informal connections than in their first class among 17 other students. In addition, they may be more likely to engage with students they remember from orientation even after their first or second course when enthusiasm for the challenge of online coursework begins to wane.

Evaluation

A survey was conducted to evaluate student perceptions of the online nursing orientation upgrade. To better assess learning rather than reaction alone, surveys were sent to students in week two of the first course. Return of surveys was approximately 20% of orientation participants.

Quantitatively, 94.6% of participants were “Satisfied” to “Very Satisfied” with the orientation overall, and 98.8% of participants were “Satisfied” to “Very Satisfied” with orientation content. Though 82.4% “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” a moderator in the orientation

helped them understand how to communicate with classmates in the discussion forum, qualitatively other participants reported not knowing there was a moderator. This was surprising, and may be because the student did not enter the discussion forum, or did not understand what a moderator is (“is it the computer voice?!”).

Students in our RN-MS program have the opportunity to participate in orientation when ready to move into the MS portion of courses along with other students that are entering the MS program. One of the participants noted that participating in this phase of their program “gave me the opportunity to encourage others that were just getting started. Also, it was a great source of encouragement for me as well, because I got a chance to meet new people and read about their various experiences in the nursing profession.”

“No news is good news” applies to the revisions in our online orientation. While calls to the Admission Counselors with questions or complaints were common with the old orientation design, these have dropped to almost nil. Likewise, questions to the orientation moderator are now few.

Conclusion

Advances in Web 2.0 technology provide a unique and ever-changing environment to promote learning utilizing a variety of tools and instructional strategies. This offers other modes of active learning to students, as all people learn differently. In addition, informal communities influence both the affective and cognitive domains, promoting growth of the whole person. New social media tools such as a wiki provide a fun way to promote the informal communities that can contribute to student satisfaction, persistence, and learning beyond formal assignments.

Resources

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