The Freshers' Week Experience in a VLE: Can it be achieved?

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Abstract

Campus based students are welcomed to our University during the first week of their course, but for students studying by online distance learning (ODL) a comparable mechanism does not exist. Academic staff experienced in teaching by ODL considered this to be a gap in students' educational experience and, furthermore, that opportunities for early engagement of students in their online course could be enhanced. The aim of this paper is to explain the rationale for an online induction, to outline the activities undertaken by students and staff and to consider whether online induction is an effective strategy for online learning.

Keywords: Student Induction; Online Induction; Distance learning; Student Experience.

Introduction

Student induction plays an important role in laying the foundations for a positive student experience at university (Darling et al, 2006; Stuttard, 2007). It provides opportunities for social networking, familiarisation of the university's facilities and introduction to the rules and regulations which govern educational processes. For those students whose course is delivered via online distance learning, with no requirement to attend the university campus, the lack of an induction period could be seen not only as a gap in their educational experience, but also a difference in quality between traditional taught and online distance learning students studying with the same institution. In addition, web-based learning can be confusing and learner support is recognised as a key factor in student retention (Phillips et al, 2004).

Academic staff at our University, experienced in the delivery of online distance learning, developed and implemented an innovative online induction. This paper explains the rationale for this initiative, the decisions taken with regard to the design of the induction, identifies the activities that were undertaken by students, describes how the induction was moderated and reviews the experiences of staff and students.

Background

For many years the academic staff had delivered undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning radiography courses, both nationally and internationally, and from 2005 all radiography courses were delivered via online distance learning (ODL) using the university's virtual learning environment, which at that time was WebCT. Whilst there was considerable diversity in the student group across the portfolio of radiography courses (Table 1), the academic team had observed much commonality in the needs of students studying via online distance learning (Table 2), irrespective of their geographical location, their entry level qualifications or the level of study they were undertaking. Motteram and Forrester (2005) also observed these "homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics of students" (p. 283) and, as a result, advocate an induction which is generically designed in terms of introducing students to the online environment, but which provides opportunities for accommodating individual students' needs.

Table 1:

Course Title	Academic Entry Level	Geographic Location	Professional Entry Point	Professional Exit Point
Undergraduate Courses: Cert HE (Mammographic Practice / Magnetic	NVQ3/ 'A' Levels or non standard entry admissions portfolio.	UK	Student Assistant Practitioner	Assistant Practitioner

Resonance Imaging Practice) DipHE Diagnostic Imaging Practice / FdSc Radiotherapy and Oncology Practice				
BSc (Hons) Radiography (Diagnostic or Therapeutic)	DipHE Diagnostic Imaging Practice / FdSc Radiotherapy and Oncology Practice	UK	Student Radiographer	Radiographer leading to Health Professions Council Registration
BSc (Hons) Health Sciences (Diagnostic or Therapeutic)	Diploma in Radiography (Diagnostic or Therapeutic)	UK and international; including African continent, Canada, Scandinavia, Middle East, Far East	Radiographer	Radiographer but not leading to Health Professions Council registration
Postgraduate Courses: MSc Radiography (Diagnostic or Therapeutic) MSc Computed Tomography MSc Magnetic Resonance Imaging	BSc (Hons) Radiography (Diagnostic or Therapeutic)	UK and international; including African continent, Canada, Scandinavia, Middle East, Far East	Registered Radiographer	Registered Radiographer

Table 2:

Staff observation of the common issues affecting students' engagement with their course
Lack of recent formal educational experience
Time management issues relating to the need to balance professional, personal and study commitments
No previous experience of distance learning
Limited information technology (IT) skills
Limited knowledge and understanding of the requirement for and use of academic referencing
Limited or no experience in searching for and identifying robust literature and other resources
Limited experience in the use of reflection, reflective practice and reflective writing
Feelings of isolation and the preconceived notion that a distance learning student was expected to study alone.

Having identified the similarities in students' needs across the portfolio of courses, the academic team were also keen to create greater parity with the educational experiences of taught deliveries in the university, and a lack of induction was seen as a major difference in the preparation of students for their learning. Single day campus based induction events had previously been held annually for the radiography students studying on work-based undergraduate distance learning courses in the United Kingdom. These events were very intense but highly successful and students enjoyed the opportunity for meeting their peers and the course team. In addition to this, teaching sessions were held where students were introduced to use of the university digital library, Harvard referencing and other study skills tools.

Whilst these induction events were successful they did introduce further disparities across the portfolio of radiography courses; for example within a work-based course students were sometimes unable to attend, but primarily a further lack of equality for the international distance learning students who it was felt would benefit from the additional learning and support offered by induction. For this reason the academic team sought to adapt the campus based induction into an online format.

The geographical spread of the student group across the United Kingdom and internationally meant that the asynchronous nature of an online induction would be beneficial; students could participate at any time of the day to suit their work and personal commitments. It was decided to deliver the induction over a four

day period, which it was felt was appropriate to enable delivery of essential content and to take account of their geographical spread across a variety of international time zones. Participation was not compulsory, but students were actively encouraged to participate by individual course leaders and advised of the benefits.

In addition to the need for introducing parity between campus based and distance learning students' experiences, staff considered that a preparatory 'package' to enhance students' study skills and assist them in embracing online distance learning as a mode of study was also considered to be important. This package included an interactive study guide which students received once they had been made an offer following application; with the online induction being the second stage of the package. In combination this package of customised learning objects enables easy reproduction of materials to facilitate students' transition to online learning so they become effective distance learners (Forrester et al, 2005), whilst providing opportunities to address individual students' needs (Phillips et al, 2004).

Finally, the name of the online induction was considered to be important. Whilst the terms 'induction' and 'orientation' are frequently used within different contexts (Forrester et al, 2005), the desire to replicate the experiences of campus based students led to the name 'Freshers' Week' – a term synonymous with the first week of university life in the UK.

Having identified what were considered to be important gaps in online distance learning students' university experience, Freshers' Week was designed with the following aims:

1. To enable students to 'meet' each other so that the feelings of isolation that can exist with distance learning would be minimised.
2. To enable students to learn how to navigate the online learning environment, and as such, to make the best use of a wide range of resources available to them throughout their course.
3. To enable students to familiarise themselves with the university regulations and important concepts such as academic referencing and plagiarism.
4. To enable students to 'meet' tutors and support staff.
5. To enable students to receive feedback from tutors on activities; thereby initiating a working relationship between student and tutors.

The academic team worked together in the design of the online induction, and in particular the activities, to ensure these aims were met. Building and maintaining an online community can be a challenge and, whilst the primary aim of the academic team was that the induction should provide a robust foundation for students' learning, they also considered that Freshers' week should involve students having fun. Salmon's (2004) five step model of teaching and learning online was utilised as a basis for the induction; thereby encouraging the development of students' skills with each activity, and promoting confidence and motivation as they embarked on their course of study. This approach helped foster a non-threatening environment in which students progressively entered into dialogue with a range of university personnel and their peers; culminating in a light hearted quiz at the end of the week.

Design of Freshers' Week

Freshers' Week was delivered over four days in the week preceding the start of the semester. Each day included various activities designed to meet the aims of the induction; including discussion postings, searching for articles in the university digital library, researching information in the university regulations or composing short pieces of work to send by email to their Personal Tutor, Course Leader, Course Administrator or Student Adviser. Freshers' Week culminated in a pub quiz; a light-hearted method of assessing students' learning during the week.

For each activity students were given instructions to help them with the task and a contact email address of one of the members of the academic team who could help them should they have any difficulties. In addition to this, hints were provided to help students overcome any idiosyncrasies specific to the online learning environment.

The first delivery of Freshers' week took place in September 2009 in WebCT and included 61 new students studying on all seven radiography courses; undergraduate, postgraduate, UK and international. All members of the academic team took responsibility for e-moderating specific tasks, as well as joining the general discussions. This enabled a sharing of the workload which was very intense throughout the four day period, but also ensured that the e-moderating skills of the team, such as technical skills, content expertise, online communication skills and personal characteristics (Salmon, 2004) were fully utilised.

Although there was no formal evaluation of this first delivery some students volunteered their comments:

"Students are encouraged to develop good research practice ... I now fully view plagiarism as a constructive sign-post for supporting all academic submissions".

"This learning styles exercise ... will greatly benefit my approach to learning on a wide scale

and ultimately my success within this program".

"It was fun exchanging thoughts with fellow students – I look forward to maintaining new friendships".

The overwhelming perception from individual staff reflections and informal team debriefing concluded that although Freshers' week had been extremely busy both for staff and students, it appeared to have been an invaluably positive experience for the vast majority of students. If anything, however, the team considered that students' experiences would be enhanced if future inductions were course specific, a view shared by Phillips et al (2004), thus enabling student to student relationships to be initiated during Freshers' week and consolidated during the initial weeks of their course. Therefore, from April 2010 Freshers' week became course specific, whilst maintaining the original ethos and activities.

Further changes ensued in September 2010 when WebCT was superseded by a new bespoke virtual learning environment (VLE). This provided opportunities for staff to review the content of the previous deliveries; taking into consideration staff perception of students' experiences, student comments in the discussions and the level of student engagement in the activities. The following discussion will therefore be based upon the September 2011 delivery of Freshers' week to 16 students studying a Foundation Degree in Leadership and Management in Health and Social Care.

Discussion

At the beginning of this paper we presented the question '*The Freshers' Week Experience in a VLE: Can it be achieved?'* The following discussion will focus on the five aims of the induction, with explanation of the activities designed to address that particular aim, the experiences of staff and students and whether the aims are met.

Aim 1: To enable students to 'meet' each other so that the feelings of isolation that can exist with distance learning would be minimised.

One of the benefits of distance learning is that there is no need for students to attend the university campus, but for many students the interaction and relationship with peers and tutors is an important aspect of their experience of university life (Shin, 2002). Replication of the traditional classroom therefore becomes an important task for the online tutor, as well as creating a non-threatening environment to encourage student participation and help establish an effective learning community (Jeffries, 2006).

Introduction to the online classroom begins on day one of Freshers' Week. An activity explains terminology specific to the discussion area, such as discussion 'thread', and provides instructions to explain how to post messages. Students begin by posting a simple introductory message in a pre-prepared discussion thread in which they identify their name, where they are based (eg: UK or international), and something about their job or their personal situation which they are happy to share with their new peers. Students are also asked to respond to other students' messages and quite quickly these result in an exchange of common interests. This use of simple discussions within the VLE not only introduces students to the VLE, but the socialising activity provides a foundation (Salmon, 2004) on which to build subsequent collaborative activities within their course.

In reality these initial postings are quite superficial, but they do serve as a worthwhile icebreaker with mutual support and encouragement being a common feature of most messages, and friendship connections beginning to appear between some students. Interestingly Freshers' week is not mandatory, but in this cohort 15 out of the 16 students participated and frequently commented that they enjoyed meeting their fellow students. Maintaining this student to student interaction is important throughout the duration of Freshers' Week so that students then feel more confident in conversing with their peers online once they begin their course. However, for some students maintaining an online dialogue is something which feels very alien to them and they therefore need frequent encouragement from tutors. This is reflective of traditional classroom experiences where some students sit quietly with limited contribution to the group, but the inability for the online tutor to visibly see any inactive students makes it a more difficult situation to manage. In reality general encouragement through the discussion area is appropriate, but specific students who are failing to engage are contacted by email on a more pastoral level.

Induction to the VLE is important not only for socialisation and peer support, but also to introduce students to self study and online group activities (Motteram and Forrester, 2005). Furthermore, Paloff and Pratt (2007) argue that online learning is an active process requiring students not only to participate, but also to collaborate with each other in order that their learning is successful. Students are introduced to online collaboration through a further activity on day one in which they are required to investigate their preferred learning style. This is a multi-faceted activity with specific criteria. Students are introduced to the use of web-based resources and, once they have identified their preferred learning style, they apply what they have learned about their preferred style to their new online learning situation; specifically how to plan

and organise their time, as well as skills for reading and retaining information. Having undertaken this learning activity students are asked to post a message in a pre-prepared discussion thread. Students are asked in their message to identify their preferred learning style or combination of styles, the strategies which they find useful in helping them to learn, and the things which they find difficult about learning. Students are then asked to reply to other students to share ideas for different learning strategies. This activity instigates discussion and support which students appear to genuinely enjoy.

Providing opportunities for students to 'meet' in the online environment before the start of their course has proved an invaluable strategy for initiating dialogue between students, with one student commenting: *"It was a great opportunity to get to know my fellow students, learn to manoeuvre around the virtual learning sites and was like a traditional Freshers' Week minus the hangovers".* Freshers' Week also makes it possible to establish the ground rules for online behaviour, but arguably even more importantly, it provides opportunities for eradicating difficulties in accessing the online systems and minimising students' frustrations; all of which can help to promote retention (Pickar and Marshall, 2008).

Aim 2: To enable students to learn how to navigate the online learning environment, and as such, to make the best use of a wide range of resources available to them throughout their course.

Online distance learning will be a new experience for many students and an important aspect of induction is for them to learn how to navigate the online 'classroom' and to access resources available within the university. This in itself can prove challenging for students, irrespective of their level of IT competence, and whilst they appreciate the benefits and opportunities offered by online distance learning, frustration can quickly ensue once they are faced with new terminology and a variety of website formats (Ko, 2010). For the online tutor, their role may initially involve troubleshooting a myriad of IT difficulties and whilst this can be time consuming, helping students to resolve these issues quickly can impact positively on retention because students tend to persist with the challenges as opposed to giving up in frustration (Pickar and Marshall, 2008).

The Freshers' Week home page is structured with direct links to facilitate navigation. Whilst the more IT literate students are likely to have the confidence to explore navigational links of their own accord, staff felt it was important for all students to take the same route at their first login to avoid them missing essential information. A link on the home page therefore takes students directly to a welcome announcement which, among other things, identifies the aims of Freshers' Week and ends by linking directly to the induction activities.

Freshers' Week includes a total of eight activities undertaken over a four day period and encompassing a variety of tasks; including participation in discussion boards, watching interactive audio-visual presentations, accessing web-based resources, sourcing literature available through the university digital library and investigating important concepts such as plagiarism, referencing and reflection. Each activity is presented in a consistent format and identifies informal learning outcomes which will be achieved on completion of each activity; a further strategy which prepares them for their studies.

Freshers' Week culminates with a light-hearted activity. In the first delivery this involved a 'pub quiz' using multiple choice questions. However, following the transition from WebCT to the VLE this quiz functionality was no longer available. In addition the team reflected on the applicability of this UK cultural activity to an international audience. The replacement activity requires students to compose an online dictionary by using a Wiki page. Ending Freshers' Week in this way combines the attempt to further replicate the camaraderie experienced by campus based Freshers, whilst applying the skills they have learned during the week and at the same time learning how to create a Wiki page. In this activity students provide one word to summarise their feelings of the week – this is their dictionary entry. They are expected to define their word and cite a reference to support the definition, to include a reference list and, having defined their word, they then write a brief reflection to explain their choice of word. The nominated tutor for this activity provides an example and students enter into this activity with good humour. On a more serious note, this activity does enable course staff to identify those students who appear to display undue anxiety about their forthcoming studies, in addition to highlighting those students who may need additional study skills support. Furthermore, it builds upon the collaborative activities that have taken place throughout the week, thereby fostering further opportunities for the creation of friendship and support between students.

Freshers' Week provides fundamental skills to encourage self directed study (Motteram and Forrester, 2005) and to empower students for their forthcoming studies. The range of activities included within Freshers' Week replicate many of the features of campus based learning and by the close of Freshers' Week students begin to appreciate that their online learning experience mimics that of more traditional courses.

Aim 3: To enable students to familiarise themselves with the university regulations and important concepts such as academic referencing and plagiarism.

Introducing students to university rules, regulations and formalities is an important aspect of induction (Forrester et al, 2005). Furthermore, the University Student Charter expects students "to take part in the programme of activities we organise and read any information we give you, including our regulations, to help prepare you for your studies" (Anglia Ruskin University, 2011). On day 2 of Freshers' Week a single academic activity addresses many of these issues. Students are asked to compose a piece of work in which they explain what they understand by the term plagiarism and why it is important. Specific criteria are applied to this activity, namely; a word limit of 400 words is applied, they must use a minimum of two references cited using the Harvard style, they must provide a reference list and they must also include their student identification number in a header or footer. Students are given directions to resources within the university digital library, but are also encouraged to source their own resources. Their completed piece of work is emailed to a nominated tutor who provides written formative feedback which is returned to the student by email; again, a system which is utilised during their course. The feedback addresses the criteria applied to the activity, so for instance if a student has exceeded the word count they are informed about the implications this would have if it were a formal assignment. Students are also given feedback about the appropriateness of their chosen resources, as well as the accuracy of their referencing.

This academic activity is a valuable exercise for both staff and students and whilst it may appear to be a formidable exercise for an induction activity, it serves to reinforce fundamental rules which will be applied during their course. The named tutor provides constructive feedback and where students have not fully addressed the criteria, or if they have committed plagiarism, they are offered the opportunity to re-submit their work. This clearly increases the workload for both tutor and student, but those students who take the opportunity for re-submitting their work, particularly those who have committed plagiarism, report it to be an invaluable learning exercise with 12 out of 16 students in the September 2011 cohort evaluating this activity to be the most useful.

Aim 4: To enable students to 'meet' tutors and support staff.

The role of the online tutor is crucial in motivating students to engage in the VLE. This begins with providing socialising activities which facilitate progression onto collaborative activities for effective learning (Salmon, 2004). The effort which has to be made by the tutor in encouraging online participation must not be underestimated and promoting the benefits of the VLE is an important aspect of this (Kreijins et al, 2003; Salmon, 2011).

Frequent interaction between tutors and students is a further important feature of students achieving that sense of belonging to the university (Motteram and Forrester, 2005; Dawn et al, 2008), but also in terms of feeling supported both academically and pastorally by the course team. Shin (2002) argues that tutors play a fundamental role in helping students to feel secure and it is therefore essential that tutors lay the foundations for a working relationship between themselves and students as early as possible. A range of activities during Freshers' Week facilitate this using a combination of strategies; including discussion postings, announcements in the VLE, email dialogue, audio-visual presentations in which students can see and hear different members of the course team, and activities which require students to email written work to a named tutor for formative feedback.

Arguably one of the most important support mechanisms for students is the Personal Tutor (Ridley, 2006 cited in Dawn et al, 2008) and these introductions are made via an activity on day one of Freshers' Week. Email exchange initiates dialogue, provides opportunity for the Personal Tutor to outline their role and to explain the support mechanisms available. An audio-visual presentation also enables students to see and hear their Personal Tutor, thus helping to facilitate a more personal relationship.

A two stage activity on day three enables students to meet non-academic support staff; namely the Course Administrator and Student Adviser. Stage one of the activity directs students to find information in their course handbook which explains the role of these staff and their contact details. Stage two requires students to introduce themselves to each of these personnel by email and to explain the support offered by that person during their studies; thereby confirming students' understanding.

Students' success can be influenced by effective interaction with tutors and support staff (Shin, 2002) and whilst this can be difficult to achieve in online distance learning, Freshers' Week enables tutors to open the channels of communication between students and the various mechanisms for academic and pastoral support.

Aim 5: To enable students to receive feedback from tutors on activities; thereby initiating a working relationship between student and tutors.

At the start of any course it is important to establish rules and protocols for communication and in view of the various communication methods used in online distance learning deliveries it could be argued that it is even more important to define the ground rules for each method (Ko and Rossen, 2010). This is approached within Freshers' Week by providing students with instructions for all activities and, for formative activities, specific criteria which they need to address such as working within a word count and

use of references. Some students could perhaps find this intimidating, but by adopting this consistent approach from the outset it ensures all students are managed with parity and equity, as well as introducing students to formative methods utilised within the course.

Students must recognise the importance in maintaining frequent dialogue with tutors (Santy and Smith, 2007), but tutors need to regularly reinforce this message to maximise students' opportunities for success. Encouraging students to submit work for formative feedback is one mechanism for facilitating students' academic development and Freshers' Week provides opportunity for introducing students to this process. The academic activity on day two in which students investigate plagiarism is a particularly worthwhile task, not only by making it clear from the outset of their studies how plagiarism can be avoided, but also to initiate the working relationship between students and tutors. Sit et al (2005) suggest that students value feedback of this nature and informal feedback from our students certainly reinforces this sentiment, with one student saying: *"Thank you very much for your comments/feedback, it is very useful for my studies. I am working on the referencing side of things; I can't believe that I made that schoolboy error of not including quotation marks. I guess it is a lesson learnt and hence why I have found the Freshers' Week an invaluable tool".*

Conclusion

Induction is an essential aspect of introducing students to university life (Darling et al, 2006); in particular in initiating relationships between students, academic tutors, personal tutors and support staff (Stuttard, 2007). Freshers' week was implemented to fill a gap in online distance learning students' learning journey and to create an event which replicates the experiences of campus based students; thereby promoting students' feeling of connectedness to the university (Shin, 2002).

Freshers' week was initially introduced in 2009 across an entire portfolio of courses to 61 students. The overall perception of staff at the end of the first delivery was one of success and that the aims had been met, but that subsequent deliveries should be made to individual course cohorts. This has proved to be a successful development and in the September 2011 cohort of the FdSc Leadership and Management in Health and Social Care 14 out of 16 students felt better prepared for their course after Freshers' Week, with one student commenting:

> *"Not knowing entirely what to expect, I found Fresher's week an incredibly important tool in preparing for "the real thing". There were lots of excellent activities that gave an introduction to what we would expect to find throughout semester 1. I felt that this helped me to gently ease into formal studies, as it has been a considerable period of time since I had taken on any form of qualification".*

Freshers' Week continues to evolve, with staff reviewing each delivery in light of their experiences and in response to student feedback elicited via an anonymous online questionnaire. In the evaluation of the September 2011 Freshers' Week 10 out of 16 students reported limited IT skills and lack of confidence at the start of the week, but in designing activities which start with simple navigational tasks, those students with less well developed IT skills appear to be better prepared and more confident at the start of their course. It could be argued that students who are more confident in their IT skills can be put off with these simple techniques, but it is important for tutors to promote the staged approach (Santy and Smith, 2007) and to encourage engagement by all students.

There is no denying that Freshers' Week is an intense period of activity for academic staff, but a team approach and the sharing of activities serves to distribute the workload. We firmly believe that Freshers' Week is invaluable for students and at the start of this paper we raised the question of whether Freshers' Week can be achieved in a VLE. In our experience of delivering an entirely online course with no requirement for on campus attendance, we profoundly believe it can. Nevertheless a number of areas for further research have emerged. A detailed comparison of the experiences and perceptions of campus-based and online students would serve to offer additional knowledge about the parity between the two delivery modes of induction. In addition, further exploration into the links between the socialisation aspects of Fresher's Week, learner support and student retention may offer valuable information to enhance the student experience on these work-based distance learning courses.

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