

The background of the cover is a photograph of sand dunes. The top half shows the dunes in a light, hazy atmosphere, while the bottom half is in shadow, showing more detail of the sand's texture. A starfish is visible in the lower right corner, partially buried in the sand.

The STAR Project

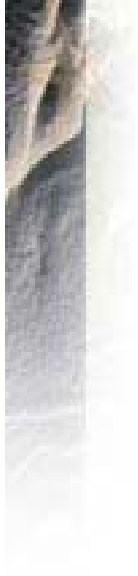
(Student Transition and Retention)

E-tutor Support for Inducting Distance Learning Students

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SUMMARY

Distance learning students on web based programmes require support to learn how to use the virtual learning environment before they can exploit its features for interaction both with fellow students and with staff.

This project examines the use of a pre-teaching induction week during which new students are helped to find their way around WebCT by a trained e-tutor. It was found that uptake was poor and no more effective than other, less labour intensive means of induction. In general, distance learning students do not avail themselves of pre-entry activities.

In a follow up study greater engagement was found when on-line induction was integrated into one of the taught modules.

Key words: Induction, distance learning, retention

INTRODUCTION

The PgDip Biomedical Science (Distance Learning) course recruits students each year from around the world. The course uses e-tutors to support student learning and assessment. Each e-tutor is a specialist in the subject of the module undertakes an e-moderation course and is assigned 20 to 25 students within their module of study. The e-tutor's role is to support individual students by monitoring progress and responding to questions. The students are mature and self-motivated but their full-time employment and other commitments mean that they cannot afford apparent ineffective effort hours.

Induction week (effectively week 0), during which students are expected to familiarise themselves with the virtual learning environment (WebCT) is a largely passive experience for students as e-tutors commence their role on week 1 of module delivery. Thus much time is spent in the first few weeks of teaching in students learning how to be distance learners rather than in developing their knowledge and skills of the subject. This reluctance of students to waste time in non-subject based activity detracts from their ability to interact effectively within the subject in the early weeks of the course.

The University of Ulster's Institute of Life Long Learning manages the University virtual learning environment (Campus One) and provides a virtual tour of WebCT as an online induction. Experience thus far has shown that relatively few students avail themselves of this facility. The intention of this project was to develop and evaluate a process in which e-tutors took their tutees through the features of the electronic

system and guided them into appropriate study habits prior to the formally taught part of the module.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

At its outset the STAR project researched, produced and published a set of guidelines based on the causes of student attrition and which pointed the way towards possible good practice. The STAR guidelines relevant to this case study are 1.3 and 2.5:

- 1.3** Support should be available prior to study particularly where problems of transition may be predictable.
- 2.5** Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.

Cook, *et al* 2005

THE PRACTICE

The Initial Induction Procedure

67 students accepted places on the course and were divided into 4 groups of about 17 students. Each was assigned to an e-tutor.

Campus One provides an on-line tutorial but it assumes that students already have an elementary knowledge of WebCT before they can access it. The project team therefore wrote a "How to use guide" as a guide for the tutorial package. This was communicated to students by e-mail as a part of a welcoming procedure from the Virtual School Manager and the Course Director. In addition the e-tutor contacted his/her student group to brief them on the induction week activities and signpost them to other tutorial materials (e.g. on plagiarism).

An induction package comprised

- a welcome signposting;
- an overview of the six efforts hours to be spent by the student during induction week;
- a library tutorial; and
- a plagiarism tutorial

E-tutor Training

Training for the e-tutors addressed three areas;

- i) an overview of the induction experience from an e-tutor's and a student's perspective;
- ii) discussion of the "how to use" guidelines for the "Getting started with WebCT" tutorial; and
- iii) discussion of the "use of the library" tutorial.

The questions raised and discussion generated by the e-tutors during the training was invaluable in finalising the “induction week” documentation and in refining the mini-project evaluation strategy.

Student Response

The response of students to this initiative was poor. By September 21st 2004 only 63% of the 67 students accepted on the course had registered. The e-tutors e-mailed these students in their groups with a welcome and the induction materials. The remaining 37% of students did not log onto WebCT, note the welcome and make contact with their e-tutor during induction week.

Although more of the contacted students may have used the induction materials, only 16 (38%) responded to their e-tutors (5, 1, 4 and 6 in groups 1,2, 3 and 4 respectively) during induction week (20 to 24 September 2004 inclusive) and only 2 (5%) students posted replies to the discussion board despite encouragement from all the e-tutors. Tracking of the discussion board at 4pm on 24 September 2004 indicated that the number of messages posted by groups 1 to 4 were 4, 4, 12 and 9 respectively.

This poor response was attributed to four factors:

1. Many students were not aware of the induction week programme
2. Many students did not log onto WebCT until 27 September 2004 when module delivery began, and some students were not even registered to access WebCT until 11 October 2004 (week 3 of delivery)
3. Students would engage in becoming confident e-learners on a “need to know basis”, at a time set by them, and not at a time line set outside the module delivery period.
4. Students may have found the induction material easy and therefore had no need to reply.

As a result of these initial findings the procedure was modified for a second student cohort starting the course in Winter 2005. The new process consisted of:

- Re use of the materials developed -the “How to use guide”, the plagiarism tutorial, the library guide and a set of frequently asked questions developed by the library.
- The implementation of an induction procedure concurrent with the first few weeks of the taught module;

The Second Induction Procedure

All the new students (20), joining the PgDip Biomedical Science (distance learning) course in semester 2 were assigned to a single e-tutor. The students were encouraged to engage with the induction package materials in week one (commencing 31 January 2005) and to contact the e-tutor with any queries. This encouragement continued throughout weeks two and three

Student Response

Student comments on the induction package were invited at the end of week 3 and the findings summarised as follows:

- i) all students were coping well with WebCT and their studies by week 5 of module delivery;
- ii) several students praised the value of the induction materials particularly the “frequently asked questions”.
- iii) several students made little use of the induction package because it was optional, and they were pressed for time.
- iv) these students in general use WebCT as a tool to get things done. This is characterised by
 - a. the tendency for students to compile and print lecture materials for review when time is available,
 - b. the tendency to solve problems in the use of WebCT and distance learning as they arise with the help of the available induction materials and e-tutor/library staff,
 - c. the avoidance of the discussion tool unless its use is a compulsory part of a module.

EFFECTIVENESS

Clearly the expectation that students would engage with distance-learning materials outside the declared teaching period was ill-founded. Further it proved difficult to get serious engagement with non-subject related materials. The second attempt in which support and materials were integrated with the subject based content proved more popular and judging by usage of the system equally effective.

A survey of students in the first cohort (67students) sought to identify how students used WebCT in a research design and statistics module. It resulted in 20 responses and the following findings:

- 75% of these students downloaded 100% of the notes, and only 5% of the students downloaded less than 60% of the notes.
- 65% of the students were familiar with working in WebCT by the end of the 3rd week of starting the course and all students were familiar by the end of week 8.
- While most students accessed the Biomedical Sciences Resource Area 65% of them did so infrequently. 5% of the students downloaded all the information in the Resource Area.
- 70% recommended an information-based approach to introduce WebCT based around a tutorial, course booklet, CD Rom or PowerPoint presentation prior to WebCT use; only 15% recommended the more interactive guided approach.

PROPOSED FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

We conclude that an induction week prior to commencement of new students on the PgDip Biomedical Science (Distance learning) course is not effective; it was only infrequently exploited by students and proved unpopular. The current involvement of e-tutors in supporting the content of a small group of distance learners is sufficient to solve any problems which arise in the use of the technology. It is clear that most of the students adopted a “just enough, just in time “ approach to access learning materials appropriate to the modules of study. As a consequence of this, generic materials outside the modules such as tutorial materials on “avoiding plagiarism” and “Athens passwords” were not being effectively accessed in the first three weeks of teaching.

The following changes are proposed for future induction of these distance-learning students:

- An induction which runs in parallel with the taught modules as implemented in the spring cohort but accessed through a single induction icon within a core module in each semester;
- Students will be required to complete a section of “frequently asked questions” and a short induction package including activities addressing:
 - Plagiarism,
 - Using the library,
 - Using netmail
 - Using discussion boards; and
 - Uploading an assignment.

These changes build upon the poor experience with the first cohort of students and the better experience with the smaller second cohort.

RESOURCES

The costs of this project were related to the employment of e-tutors for the additional week prior to the start of the module. Since this additional time will not be required in the final version of this activity, this will not be an additional cost. Other costs relate to the time spent in the preparation of materials such as the activities in: Plagiarism, Using the library, Using netmail; Using discussion boards; and Uploading an assignment. Some of this material was already available and the remainder represents a one-off cost.

CONTEXT

Institutional profile	
University of Ulster	<p>The University of Ulster was formed from the amalgamation of the Ulster Polytechnic and the New University of Ulster in 1984. There are 4 campuses (Jordanstown, Coleraine, Londonderry and Belfast) each of which is developing a distinctive identity.</p> <p>Most undergraduate students are domiciled in Northern Ireland but postgraduate distance learning courses attract an international clientele.</p> <p>The Coleraine campus accommodates about 4500 full time and a further 1000 part time students.</p> <p>The School of Biomedical Science is based on the Coleraine campus. It specialises in professionally recognised courses science based courses. Its has a large distance learning provision based in "Virtual School" which employs its own management and staff. The University has implemented WebCT as its virtual learning environment and this facility is managed by the centrally based Institute for Life Long Learning which can also provide assistance in translating face to face courses into distance learning materials.</p>
Course Title/Student Group	PgDip/ MSc in Biomedical Science (Distance Learning)
Size of Course	Two intakes: 67 in the autumn and a further 20 in the spring
% Mature	All students are mature and live at home.
Relevant entrance data	<p>Applicants for the PgDip must normally hold an upper second class honours degree in a science subject.</p> <p>Completion of the MSc requires that students complete a research project at their place of work and are therefore normally employed in a science laboratory.</p>

REFERENCES

Cook, A., Rushton, B.S. McCormick, S.M., and Southall, D.. (2005) *Guidelines for the Management of Student Transition*. University of Ulster. Coleraine. Also at http://www.ulster.ac.uk/star/resources/star_guidelines.pdf accessed 15-09-05