

Developing standards for best practices in prospective and new student introduction to e-learning

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As online courses and programs continue to grow at exponential rates and provide global reach, e-learning student completion, retention and persistence are areas of great concern to faculty and administrators. In response to this need the IMS Global Learning Consortium, an international e-learning technology standards and best practices organisation, is developing an evidence-based methodology to improve e-learning student persistence by identifying and defining best practices around three phases of the new student's introduction to the e-learning experience: expectations, preparation, and induction. These practices are under active development and this paper provides a progress report of work to date and an invitation to contribute to the development of this IMS standard.

Keywords: retention, persistence, induction

Introduction

As online courses and programs continue to grow and provide global reach, e-learning student completion, retention and persistence (Martinez, 2003) are areas of great concern to faculty and administrators. As suggested by Carr (2000) and O'Brien (2002), online student retention is one of the greatest weaknesses in online education. In a literature review conducted by Herbert (2006), several studies showed that the failed retention rate for online college and university undergraduates range from 20 to 50% and that online course administrators believe the failed retention rate for online courses to be 10 to 20% higher than traditional classroom environments (Frankola, 2001; Diaz, 2002; Moody, 2004).

The student's first set of experiences with their e-learning courses can be either a barrier to retention or contribute to the likelihood of persistence. Tyler-Smith (2006) argues that the sense that students are losing control and becoming overloaded in their initial experience of e-learning contributes to their early departure. Students who have a poor set of first experiences with their e-learning courses often become frustrated and dissatisfied, and consequently more likely to drop out. Likewise students who engage early and frequently with their course content, faculty, and online peers in an effective and cohesive manner with clear expectations of both the student and institution are well positioned to succeed (Tinto, 1975; Angelino *et al.*, 2007).

As the global reach of e-learning continues to expand, the number of college students who are participating in online courses and programs (some with significant global reach) continues to increase dramatically, despite the greater likelihood of student non-completion of course and resultant failed retention and persistence. For example, approximately 3.5 million higher education students in the United States were taking at least one online course during the fall 2006 term; a nearly 10 percent increase over the number reported the previous year (Allen & Seamen, 2007). The Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), commissioned a study (Bell *et al.*, 2002) to assess online education in Australian universities. This study found that during a 5-to-7 year period there was considerable increase in activity within universities in the use of Internet technologies for research, teaching, learning and administrative services.

In addition to the growth internationally in the use of e-learning, there has also been a significant increase in the number of students engaging in study outside of their home country. This growth, facilitated by e-learning, further challenges institutions to acknowledge the cultural expectations and backgrounds of their students both in the teaching environment and in preparation for study (Goold *et al.*, 2007; Hannon & D'Netto, 2007).

Establishing a methodology for institutional, faculty, and student introduction to fully online and blended e-learning will address several institutional, societal, and individual consequences arising from inadequate or nonexistent effective practices in this area, such as the institutional cost to recruit and replace students, failed or poor student experiences, disruption in student's attainment of academic goals and objectives, and the loss of potential workers in the field of study.

An effective and peer-reviewed methodology for student introduction into online and blended learning will enable the student and institution to set respective expectations for academic success, providing the student with a clear path to achieving learning objectives and enabling the institution means to assess its success in delivering a quality and personalised educational experience.

Identification of the initial best practice set

The IMS project group commenced work in July 2007 and has spent the past year refining the problem description and scope of work to match that presented above. The ultimate intention of the group is to produce a set of documents that will provide guidance to institutions on supporting the introduction of students to e-learning. These documents will include literature reviews, meta-analysis of key practices, a descriptive model, and a set of documented key practices. The group has structured these practices into three key areas:

Communication of student and institutional expectations prior to student's first e-learning course experience addresses the formation of student goals and communication of those goals to the institution, and the formation, documentation, and communication of institutional expectations made of students.

Preparation by students for e-learning courses addresses the preparation by students intending to undertake a course with substantial e-learning content, given their 1) experience with e-learning, 2) access to appropriate technology, 3) level of confidence with e-learning technologies and environments, and 4) readiness to learn utilising these methodologies.

Induction of students into e-learning courses addresses the induction of the student to their first course in a program of study. The scope of this phase is from the students log-in to the first course through the drop-add period or the first two weeks of the course, whichever is later.

These three main phases are used to structure activities grouped into eight main areas. These were identified through a series of workshops and through analysis of the literature, however it is anticipated that they will evolve significantly as the work of the group progresses and in response to feedback from the wider community. The combination of the phases and areas results in the matrix provided in Table 1 which has been populated with the initial set of questions guiding the current work.

Table 1: Best practices for introducing students to e-learning

Expectations	Preparation	Induction
Assessment and Communication of Expectations		
How does the institution identify the rationale for the expectations it will make of staff and students to engage in e-learning? What actions does the institution take to ensure the rationale is reflected in systems and processes? What actions does the institution undertake to ensure that it has a clear picture of the students' expectations?	What are the formal procedures for communicating with students prior to study commencing? How do these procedures use the information on student expectations?	How is the rationale for expectations on staff and students reflected in the systems and procedures in place for all courses during the induction period?
Recruitment and advisement		
How are the formal expectations of the institution communicated to students? How do the marketing materials accurately reflect challenges and requirements facing a successful distance learner?	In what way are students given the opportunity to confirm that they meet the institution expectations? What opportunities and support are given to students to explore alternative study options?	How does the institution confirm with the student that they are meeting the expectations of the institution and that the course of study is meeting the student's expectations?
Learning design and organisation		
How are the assumptions and design decisions inherent in the design of	In what ways does the course design and structure prepare students for	What aspects of the course design ensure that any potential issues are

courses conveyed to students and staff involved in the course?	successful achievement of the course learning objectives?	raised early and with a mechanism for addressing effectively?
Functional technology		
How does the institution determine the minimum expectations and characteristics of the technologies students must have access to for their studies? How does the institution communicate the expectations for access to specific technologies to students?	How does the institution provide a means for students to confirm that the technologies they have will be suitable for the requirements placed on them during study? How does the institution ensure that additional software and hardware is available for students to acquire if necessary, prior to commencing studies?	How does the institution ensure that necessary requirements have in fact been met by the students? What is the process the institution will use to address a failure by students to meet the necessary requirements for access to specific technologies? How does the institution provide any additional information or support needed to integrate student technology into the institution systems, such as passwords?
Student technology literacy		
How does the institution determine the minimum expectations and necessary technical skills students must have for their studies? How does the institution communicate the minimum expectations and necessary technical skills students must have for their studies?	How does the institution provide a means for students to confirm that they meet the minimum expectations and have the necessary technical skills needed for their studies? How does the institution provide a means for students to develop the necessary technical skills needed for their studies prior to commencement of those studies?	How does the institution validate the technical skills possessed by students on commencement of their studies? What is the process the institution will use to address a failure by students to meet the minimum expectations or possess the necessary skills?
Learning community		
How does the institution identify the characteristics of the learning communities it expects to establish within courses? How are the benefits and characteristics of effective learning communities communicated to students and staff?	How does the institution ensure that its systems can support the characteristics of the learning communities it expects to establish? How does the institution ensure that staff are committed to establishing the type of learning community expected for courses? How does the institution ensure that students are aware of the type of community they will be expected to participate in? How does the institution provide staff and students with the opportunity to practice any skills needed to be effective participants in the learning community? What aspects of course learning designs reflect the support of learning communities?	What activities are provided to ensure students are welcomed into a learning community and encouraged to participate positively? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that any issues with the functioning of the community are identified quickly and addressed effectively?
Faculty training		
How does the institution identify the key competencies it expects staff to have in the use of technology? How are staff informed of the expectations that the institution has for their technical and pedagogical skills?	How does the institution provide a mechanism for staff to confirm that they have the requisite skills and competencies needed to use core technologies? What mechanisms are provided to enable development of skills by staff in the use of core technologies? How does the institution validate the technical skills of staff prior to the commencement of teaching?	What are the mechanisms for identifying problems caused by a lack of staff competencies? What is the process the institution will use to address a failure by staff to meet the minimum expectations of skill in the use of core technologies?
Online student support services		
How does the institution identify the likely support needs of students? How does the institution identify which technologies will be used to provide support online? How does the institution communicate to students what support they can expect?	What mechanisms are in place to ensure that course designs make appropriate reference to and use of, available support services? What mechanisms are in place to confirm that the online support systems are able to be accessed and used effectively by students?	How does the institution ensure that students are shown how to access the support services and encouraged to use them? How does the institution identify any issues with the access to and effectiveness of the support services?

Ongoing work

The IMS project group has taken a year to get to this point and is well aware of the magnitude of the task facing them, even after our work to restrict the scope and focus on a very specific challenge. This type of standard is a new venture for IMS and we have yet no sense of whether this approach will prove practical in implementation. The intention is to provide documents for wider input and consultation in the very near future. We are at a very early stage with this project, despite the time taken to date, and there are many opportunities for others to join with us and help explore what we and IMS can do to help students be in the best possible position to benefit from their studies online.

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