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Dive In 2005: A CD-ROM in “Student Speak” for First Year Students

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Abstract

This paper reports on the development of a CD-ROM for undergraduate students beginning their first year of study in 2005 in the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong. The CD (entitled Dive In 2005: A Guide for Beginning Education Students) includes information about many aspects of university life ranging from general policies, procedures and resources to faculty-specific items that support the academic and social life of Education students. An innovative feature of Dive In 2005 is the degree of involvement of “experienced” undergraduate students at every level of its production. By drawing on the wisdom of these continuing students as well as staff within the faculty, a body of information was constructed to support the needs of new students. The result is a portable resource using informal language and engaging graphics that makes the information presented both relevant and readily accessible to students in transition.

Introduction

A positive first-year experience that encourages the engagement of students in the processes and procedures of university life is a critical factor in determining academic application and success. Research within the higher education sector confirms the fact that early experiences shape both the academic and social development of new students (Krause, McInnes & Welle, 2002), with recognition given to the significant role that social transition plays in the process of successful academic transition (Kantanis, 2000). The early identification of students with the culture of the university as well as the particular field of study that has been chosen are recognised as important factors in relation to retention and attrition rates as well as increasing levels of academic achievement (Lawrence, 2000; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000). In supporting a positive first-year experience, one of the many challenges faced by institutions in the higher education sector is achieving a balance between the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and the provision of equitable and relevant access to generic and faculty-specific information.

To support the enculturation and engagement of students entering the University of Wollongong (UOW) a wide range of information is available, with particular attention given to prospective students as well as those entering their first year of undergraduate study. The university’s website provides a comprehensive body of information which is supplemented by a variety of other resources and distributed to students both before and after their enrolment. In addition, individual faculties provide specific course-related information at Enrolment, Orientation and during the session as students undertake their particular programs of study. Whilst this wide range of information is provided with the intention of supporting students, its volume and complexity can be overwhelming and, at times, this experience is exacerbated by the fact that the information is couched in terms that render it either impenetrable or difficult to understand for those with limited experience in the tertiary sector. Information is frequently presented in jargon that is foreign to the uninitiated rather than in “student speak” or in terms

that have some meaning for students. Students and staff have reported that difficulties associated with accessing and understanding important information can make the transition to university life more challenging than is necessary.

In order to access the information that will provide them with support, students must become proficient in the skills associated with information literacy, that is, they must develop expertise in locating relevant information and then translating it or contextualising it in ways that provide them with meaning (CAUL, 2001). This presents problems for new students given their inexperience in the tertiary sector, the overwhelming amount of information with which they are presented and the assumed level of familiarity with particular terms and ideas related to university resources and processes that is at odds with the experience of beginning students. To address this problem, it is necessary to provide new students with ready access to information that has direct relevance for them and to couch it in terms that have meaning for them. This will help them to develop the skills that are necessary for navigating the vast amount of information they face and it will also provide them with a basis for becoming increasingly self-reliant as they address the challenges inherent in a continuing program of study.

The Development of Dive In 2005

Dive In 2005 was the focus of a pilot project aimed at developing a resource for supporting and enhancing the learning experiences of first-year students in the Faculty of Education at UOW. Students and staff played significant roles in the choice, development and presentation of material for the CD. The project was funded by a faculty grant from the Teaching and Innovation Sub-Committee (TISC). The grant made it possible for the principal researcher and Sub Dean of the Faculty, Dr Pauline Lysaght, to employ two “experienced” students: Mr Russell Walton who was engaged as the project manager and another student who was employed as an assistant. Mr Walton had entered UOW as a mature-aged student and, in 2004 when the project began, was enrolled in the second year of a B. Teaching (Primary) degree. The student assistant was in her third year of a B. Teaching (Early Childhood) degree and had entered the course immediately after completing her HSC. The diverse experiences of these two students prior to entry to their degrees were considered especially useful for the project because of the different perspectives they were able to bring to it.

Scaffolding learning experiences

Students were involved at every level of the production of the CD. In addition to the two students employed within the project, contributions and advice were also drawn from a range of other “experienced” students, that is, students who had recently (within one or two years) completed the first year of one or another of the degrees offered by the Faculty of Education. The involvement of students was regarded as a key factor in producing a resource that would support the learning experiences of new students. From a Vygotskian perspective, effective learning takes place when individuals are afforded opportunities to grow into the culture that surrounds them (Vygotsky, 1978). The CD was viewed as a tool that would support this objective because it provided relevant information in a student voice, that is, in terms that translated the more formal language of the institution. The information contained on the CD as well as the language in which it was couched provided opportunities for new students to master or appropriate information that would enhance the likelihood of their success. From this perspective also, learning can be particularly effective when it occurs within a context

where the “novice” engages with a more experienced peer, that is, one who has recently mastered the task at hand (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). In the case of new students, it is frequently the more knowledgeable and experienced students who can most readily provide information and support that is relevant and appropriate for the challenges they face. *Dive In 2005*, then, was developed as a resource for scaffolding the learning experiences of beginning students.

Gathering information – Surveys of students and staff

Initially, a brief, informal online survey was sent to all enrolled undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education. Students were asked to identify resources that they had found useful when first beginning their programs of study and a number of services and facilities were identified to prompt responses. For example, facilities such as the Student Services Centre and the Curriculum Resources Centre within the Faculty of Education were included, as were more general resources such as Student Online Services (SOLS), university policies and the counselling service. Students were also asked to construct a “wish list” containing items that, with hindsight, they believed would have been of benefit to them when they first began studying at UOW. The students were also asked to comment on the possible utility of a CD and design features that would make it useful as well as appealing to new students. The same survey was sent to staff within the Faculty of Education as well as staff in key positions across the university with a view to gathering ideas about the kind of support they believed would be of most use for new students. In addition to the responses gathered from surveys of students and staff, the university’s website and faculty resources were scoured for information that would provide personal, social and academic support for new students.

Developing five major themes

The information drawn from all of these sources was analysed and five major themes emerged. These themes were identified under the following terms: Who, What, Where; I, Student; Fact File; Just 4 Fun; and ICT. Within the major themes further sub-categories were identified. For example, a high priority for many students was learning how to reference correctly. While information is made available to students at the university and faculty levels, students reported that this was sometimes difficult to locate. Consequently, “Referencing” became a sub-category of I, Student, and was presented alongside the sub-category of “Plagiarism”, a clear concern for students who were unsure of referencing procedures. Other examples of generic information under the major theme Who, What, Where included “Study Support”, which provided direct links to a section of the university’s website from where self-access resources could be downloaded. Another example under this major theme was “Getting Here” which appeared as a pdf document outlining bus routes, train information and local cycleways. Faculty-specific information, also included under the Who, What, Where theme, included “Rogues Gallery” which comprised of photographs of staff members along with their contact details. Under the theme Fact File, “Officialdom” provided information that is especially relevant to pre-service teachers, including links to education-related bodies such as the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Board of Studies (BoS).

Drawing on the wisdom of students

In order to develop and refine the information base related to each theme, a student reference group was created based on the feedback initially given in response to the survey. The reference group was made up of about ten students who had shown a particular interest in the idea of a CD and who had contributed ideas that appeared either to encapsulate the responses

of a number of other students or that were novel. Members of the reference group were asked to develop in more detail the ideas to which they had referred in their responses to the survey. They were also invited to contribute new items, some involving more general aspects of university life and others related to their personal experiences as students. The “Student Voices” section of I, Student, for example, included mini-narratives on topics related to the particular experiences of individual students. Items by mature-age students as well as those who entered straight from high school provided information about the challenges of study from these two different perspectives. Other students wrote about what it is like to be studying across first and second year simultaneously, whilst those who had been fortunate enough to undertake teaching experiences overseas or in rural areas were able to contribute written information as well as photographs of their experiences.

Staff within the faculty, including the Sub Dean, also developed items for the CD related to their particular areas of responsibility. An overview of the five undergraduate programs was provided by the Associate Dean (Undergraduate), while the Directors of each of these programs contributed brief outlines of their courses. All of these items were written in a less formal voice than would usually be expected, that is, they were not presented in “university speak”.

In addition, both students employed within the project contributed written pieces, with responsibility for much of the additional writing, editing and organisation of material undertaken by the project manager. A final draft of material to be included on the CD was sent to the student reference group and key members of staff, both within and outside the faculty, before a complete copy was developed.

Design and production of the CD

The design and production of the CD was undertaken on the basis of a Faculty Service Agreement (FSA) between the Faculty of Education and the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR) at UOW. Academic staff at UOW can negotiate support under an FSA where their work involves a project directly related to a subject or program within their faculty. Dive In 2005 qualified under these terms and staff at CEDIR provided invaluable expertise and support in the production and duplication of the CD. The structure of the CD makes navigation relatively simple and links to items on the university website as well as other relevant sites have been included. The title, Dive In, is also reflected in the image of a surfer presented on the cover of the CD.

Feedback from students and staff

The final product was made available to all new undergraduate students as well as students enrolling in the Graduate Diploma of Education in 2005. A brief overview and demonstration of the CD was provided during the orientation activities organised by the faculty and new students were encouraged to make use of the resource and to provide feedback over the course of the year about its strengths as well as its limitations. Each staff member was also provided with a copy of the CD with an invitation to provide feedback. During the course of 2005, a brief survey was distributed to students online and also via hard copy requesting information about the attractiveness of the design of the CD, its layout and ease of navigation, most frequently used themes, most useful items and items for inclusion as well as suggestions for improvements in subsequent editions of the CD. A similar survey was distributed to staff within the faculty and to key staff across the university.

Feedback from both students and staff was overwhelmingly positive, in fact, although the CD was intended for first-year students only, many second- and third-year students who had either been involved in its production or who had heard about it from peers also requested copies. Where additional information for a future version of the CD was requested by students, the focus was on both academic and social aspects of life. More information about gaining access to computers was a common theme, as well as learning how to use them more effectively. An example of the latter was requests for tuition in word-processing programs so that students could complete their assignments to the standard expected by academic staff. Requests for more information on where they could go to relax reflect the fact that many students move away from home to attend university and, in unfamiliar surroundings, are uncertain about the facilities available for leisure.

A request from staff was to provide specific directions for referencing, that is, not just how to find the section containing the information but highlighting key points to make them prominent and more obvious for students. More detailed information has been provided in the 2006 edition of *Dive In* and, whilst it was not possible to include a search facility in the 2005 version, this issue has also been addressed in the more recent edition. On a lighter note, there were also general requests for more recipes to be included under “Take the Taste Challenge”, within the Just 4 Fun theme. This section included a collection of recipes for cheap but filling student tucker provided by both staff and students.

Some members of staff who had been newly appointed when *Dive In* 2005 was initially released also provided positive feedback. In each case, they commented that the information contained on the CD was comprehensive and provided them with a good overview of the processes, procedures and resources available within the faculty and across the university. One practical recommendation from their feedback was that the CD should be made available to new staff members as part of an induction package.

In Conclusion

Given the diverse nature of the student body, equitable access to generic information as well as specific information dictated by the nature of individual faculties is imperative for ensuring a successful experience in the first year of study and beyond (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The aim of this project was to develop a CD that would act as a resource to support and enhance the engagement of first-year students in the Faculty of Education. To meet this aim, the CD contains generic information relevant to all new students as well as information specifically related to the Faculty of Education and, importantly, to the different programs of study offered at the undergraduate level as well as the Graduate Diploma of Education. It has been presented in a format that is simple yet appealing and that provides the novice with ready access to important information.

There are a number of advantages to providing students with information in a CD format. First, it is a portable resource that does not rely on internet access, an important factor for students who may have regular access only when on campus. Second, it is possible to identify information that is important to all new students and to present it in a manner that is succinct. This provides students with a snapshot of the details they need and, when internet access is available, it allows them to link to more involved documents that exist on the university website. Third, the use of informal language and engaging graphics will encourage students to

seek the information they require to meet their individual needs. A resource that is user-friendly and that promotes feelings of competence and self-reliance supports the development of students as independent learners. Finally, the inclusion of faculty-specific information that is integral to the course they have chosen will encourage new students to develop a student identity aligned with their individual patterns of study.

New students develop a sense of connectedness and engagement as they gain the necessary knowledge and expertise to address the challenges of university life. Experiences that support and enhance their identification and enculturation within the university and also within the particular faculty in which their major area of study is based are vital for ensuring academic, personal and social success. Increased diversity in the student population over recent years is heralded by some as a sign of wider participation, particularly for those defined as belonging to equity groups. If we are serious about providing access to higher education for this diverse range of students we must also provide appropriate resources because, as Tinto (1999) has noted, access without support will not improve opportunities for success. The initial version of Dive In 2005, developed as part of a pilot study, has proved successful for the cohort of students for whom it was intended. Based on this success, a more comprehensive resource has been developed for wider use across the university.

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