Orientation – the best of both worlds

Alan Calder
Academic Support Division
James Cook University

Abstract

The challenge for universities to successfully provide all new students with support and survival skills during orientation programs is considerable. First year students, who as a group are at risk of dropping out as much as any equity group (Abbott-Chapman and Edwards, 1998), clearly need support and preparation prior to commencing their studies. Many of these students, however, cannot or do not wish to attend orientation programs. When students are unable to attend due to factors including work or family commitments, alternative delivery strategies for orientation programs are necessary. Attempts have been made to introduce ‘virtual orientation’ programs yet such programs, while making information readily available, fail to provide the very personal, face-to-face support, social interaction and reassurance that many first year students so desperately need. James Cook University has for some time provided this personal support through a highly successful Student Mentor Program. This presentation will report on attempts to combine the benefits of peer support with the flexible delivery of core learning skills such as time management and other generic study skills.

Preamble

In relation to the James Cook University experience of mentoring, Hanley and Treston pose the question: "Where to from here?" In partly answering that question they suggest both an increased ownership by the mentors of the Program as well as a more faculty based recruitment and training of mentors (Hanley and Treston, 1998). This paper seeks to introduce another element into the equation. Indeed this paper proposes a marriage between two unlikely partners - flexible learning technologies and the mentor involvement in the first year of university.

Introduction

Student Mentoring has evolved separately at both the main campuses of James Cook University. The smaller Cairns Campus initiated a Buddy Program in 1991 when enrolments were about 300. With a current enrolment of 2299 in November 1998, mentors continue to actively participate in orientation and on-going learner support. In fact, considerable ownership of the program by mentors can now be illustrated through faculty specific orientation workshops and a Mentor Corner in the library - both of these being initiated and maintained by mentors. The small size of the Cairns Campus still enables the Mentor Coordinator to personally know each of the 62 mentors and to guide and advise them when necessary.

The Townsville Campus began a Student Mentor Program in 1996 after reports of student mentoring being used as a successful mechanism for assisting students in the transition from school to university. As with the Cairns experience, the mentors have always been an integral part of the orientation process and the Program itself has evolved to include greater mentor ownership and a more faculty based structure. In 1998 160 mentors met with 1500 new students during orientation. Mentor training at both campuses involves planning the welcome procedures for the new students as well as building a program based on reflection of the mentors’ own first year experiences. The training programs involve mentors exploring these issues in the context of what would and should be expected of a mentor and the qualities needed to be a good mentor.

Other research and experiences

The proposal to link mentors and flexible learning technologies is neither new nor untested. Recent experiences at other universities report favourable results when mentors are involved in using and helping to introduce flexible learning technologies to new students, particularly when this occurs within a faculty context (Andrews and Van Dyke, 1998; Franklin and Peat, 1998; Rhoden,1996). Similarly, the benefits of mentor involvement, if not ownership of the orientation process as a whole, has been demonstrated to be of considerable benefit to new students (Hanley and Treston, 1998; Pope and Van Dyke, 1998).
James Cook University proposes to push this idea further by developing on-line study skills and orientation modules in consultation with mentors. As well as the mentor driven on-campus activities provided during Orientation Week, there will also be an orientation experience for new students who are unable to attend on-campus activities - an experience jointly developed and guided by support staff, faculties and mentors.

The proposed JCU model of student mentoring and orientation offers some strategies aimed at meeting the challenges identified by McInnis (1998) from the 6 directional changes that the West Review Committee (1998) saw occurring in higher education. If indeed the ultimate aim of higher education is to produce autonomous and independent life-long learners as McInnis argues, then two of the challenges most relevant to James Cook University are:

- the challenge of disengaged students
- the challenge of new technologies.

The jcu context

These two potential impediments to the successful first year experience are inextricably linked at JCU and are most apparent at the rapidly growing Cairns Campus where 56.1% of students are mature age students and 46.5% are classified as part-time. No figures are available which enable the identification of "full-time" students who are also employed and there are difficulties in identifying those students who are undertaking subjects or parts of subjects which are delivered through flexible delivery methods. One can assume that all of the above characteristics point to a considerable amount of disengagement from the university learning network based purely on lifestyles and priorities. The importance of establishing learning networks has been highlighted (Tinto, 1995; Clulow and Brennan, 1996) and it is a concern that many JCU students can be identified as not being connected to the learning experience through such networks.

One of the great hopes for flexible learning technologies is that they will enable the creation of virtual learning networks for such students. It could be argued that JCU has been advancing the cause of flexible learning technologies for some time. The Flexible Learning Unit produces multimedia, print, video and web-based resources for a number of faculties and produced some pioneering work in teacher education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the early 1990's. In the area of on-line learning support, templates have been designed to provide consistent and easy access to subject information and include resources and communication packages such as WebBoard, an on-line conferencing system.

A Learning Support Home Page(http://www.cimm.jcu.edu.au/netshare/learn/) provides a range of on-line services including links to interactive Study Skills workshops which are currently being adapted from face-to-face workshops as an action learning project involving first year students, mentors and Academic Support Staff. As with many similar web-based learning support resources, there are contact details for support staff, maps of campuses, a sign up form for a study skills mailing list, workshop timetables and links to other useful on-line resources.

New learning technologies do indeed offer potential with regards to increased communication options, encouraging active learning, flexibility in course content, delivery and scope, as well as catering for a range of learning styles (Bates, 1996). JCU students are offered considerable assistance through introductory workshops offered by Library Staff and other Academic Support Staff. The question remains, however, as to whether such resources and tools are providing an effective learning network for the disengaged students referred to earlier.

Through dealings with mentors and students at JCU Cairns Campus, support staff are observing increasing dissatisfaction with the use of new learning technologies. Changes to campus computing facilities in relation to access, charges for printing and other services may be contributing factors, but nevertheless there is a lack of enthusiasm for such technologies, particularly on the part of our significant numbers of mature age students. Even for those students who are comfortable with new learning technologies there is evidence to suggest that technological innovations too readily overlook the importance of social interaction in the learning process (McInnes and James, 1995). In
addition, Learmonth’s (1998) experiences challenge the assumption that, just because materials are available, students will automatically use them and get value from them. It was found that on-line support can be useful but that students need to be directed in its use and have time to practice. Flexible learning can be achieved only through individual support, guidance and encouragement - all of which must be sustained over time.

If the problem areas of using new learning technologies are therefore a lack of social interaction as well as sustained support, then who better to provide this link than a mentor? And when better to initiate this program than during the first week a student spends at university?

**Orientation 1999**

In 1999, the orientation process at James Cook University's Cairns Campus will include the following activities.

**Pre Orientation Week**

Mentor Training - 1 day run by support staff, academics.

Kickstart - 3 day intro. to university for arts and social science students run by mentors.

How to use a Computer - workshops for absolute novices run by support staff, mentors.

Writing Workshops - covering academic writing, NESB etc. run by study skills advisers.

Survival Maths - bridging maths for those returning to study run by study skills advisers.

**Orientation - 3 days**

Welcome, campus tours and BBQ with mentors.

Students who do not attend will be advised of mentor program and on-line orientation activities through the enrolment guide. All new students will be contacted.

On-campus Study Skills workshops run by faculties and Academic Support Staff with mentor assistance. Students attending these sessions will be invited to visit the on-line version of the session. Evaluation of both sessions will be invited.

E-mail, Internet, library orientation, introduction to campus computers - on-going workshops by library staff, faculty librarians with mentors acting as tutors.

In all of the technology based orientation activities, mentors will draw attention to the Mentor Home Page, Study Skills Home Page and other resources.

Library orientation, use of library catalogue and subject information sessions will also be available as an on-line workshops.

**Post Orientation Week**

E-mail, Internet, library orientation, intro to campus computers - on-going workshops by library staff, faculty librarians with mentors acting as tutors.

Photos of Orientation posted on Mentor Home Page

Follow up meetings with mentors.

Structure/ideas shared amongst mentors/mentees and Study Skills Advisers.

Weekly on-campus workshops on generic study skills with on-line versions posted to Study Skills Home Page.

On-going mentor/mentee interactions (face-to-face, phone, email, web-based) guided where necessary by Study Skills Advisers.

**Development of on-line orientation modules**

An important strength of existing mentoring models, notably those of Central Queensland University (Pope and Van Dyke, 1998) and James Cook University (Hanley and Treston, 1998), is
the way in which mentors clearly see that they are learning leadership skills and that the process involves not only status for the mentor and support for the mentee but also learning and growth for both. An extension of these models being proposed is to involve the mentors in the design, evaluation and promotion of on-line resources. The mentors will be gaining valuable communication and instructional design skills and further enhancing their ownership of both the Mentor and Orientation Programs.

"Getting it Together", a workshop on time management and organisational skills is an example of an orientation session which is being trialed as both a face-to-face workshop and an on-line module (http://www.cimm.jcu.edu.au/develop/GIT2). Students responded well to the Message in a Bottle activity so this was translated into an on-line interaction which asks students to prioritise. They are then provided with feedback in relation to their decisions. Wherever possible, interactions are built in. Apart from being based on sound instructional design methodology (Aleassi and Trollip, 1991), such interactions were met enthusiastically by students, some of whom had previously explored other web resources on time management, only to be confronted with pages of text.

The development and evaluation of face-to-face workshops and the translation to on-line versions has been progressing during 1998. Further trialing by mentors is expected to occur prior to Orientation Week in 1999.

It is envisaged that further feedback from students and mentors during 1999 will result in these modules being continually refined, some dropped completely and new ones added. In addition, mentors and faculty personnel will be encouraged to develop faculty specific modules so that the issue of providing meaningful in-context learning support is provided.

De la Harpe and Radloff (1998) sound some warnings here in relation to stand alone workshops and courses in generic study skills. They argue that such workshops lack effectiveness because the time is often too short for learning and practice, students have difficulty in transferring skills to the demands of disciplines, workshops don't address the metacognitive or attributional aspects of learning, and finally, the workshops don't address personal and contextual factors.

These are important concerns and it is hoped that the action learning process outlined above, combined with sound instructional design and faculty involvement will address many of these issues. By having ready access to the on-line resources and a mechanism designed to encourage their use, the issue of available time for practice and learning of skills will be an important part of this initiative.

Benefits of the program

For the new student

New students are provided with a safety net of support both on-campus and through contact via email and other web-based resources. All new students will be made aware that there is a mentor from their faculty available to help them whether they are able to participate in the Orientation Week activities or not. The new students will also be made aware of the extensive range of interactive study skills resources available and will be invited to social functions and study groups on a regular basis. The Mentor Home Page will keep students informed of all activities.

For the mentor

Mentors will acquire professional skills valued by the University, the community and employers. These skills will include, high level communication and group leadership skills as well as increased confidence and self-esteem. The mentors will also gain valuable skills in the use of communication and information technology.

For James Cook University

JCU will meet many of its strategic objectives such as ensuring graduates possess a commitment to independent, critical thinking and lifelong learning, communication skills, information technology skills and the capacity to contribute and perform effectively as a member of a team (Moulden, 1998). Through the Program, JCU will also address the challenge of isolated, lonely and disengaged
students and reduce attrition rates. Further benefits to JCU involve community recognition as well as marketing and promotional activities. The Student Mentor Program is already actively promoted as a feature of the quality of learning support provided by the University.

**Conclusion**

JCU’s approach to orientation involves embedding new learning technologies into an established peer support program. The reality is that new learning technologies are a fact of life now and we can't ignore their potential or their problems. Another reality is that peer support works. It makes sense for these two to enter into a long term relationship because they have much to offer each other.

**References**


The author may be contacted:

Alan Calder
Study Skills Adviser
James Cook University
PO Box 6811 Cairns Q 4870
phone: 07 4042 1146
fax: 07 4042 1204
Email: Alan.Calder@jcu.edu.au