

National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia

Flexibility: Pathways to participation

Refereed papers from the
NAEEA Conference
27 – 29 November 2013
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne Australia

Goode, E. (2013). Encouraging engagement and enhancing student experience: can an online orientation help?

In Proceedings of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia Conference; Flexibility: Pathways to participation, Melbourne, Australia, 27-29 November, 2013.
Accessed from <http://enablingeducators.org/conference/2013.html>

Published 2013 by the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia, C/- Open Access College, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia, 4350

This paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and sub-themes, originality, quality and presentation. Following review and acceptance, this full paper was presented at the NAEEA conference.

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Encouraging engagement and enhancing student experience: can an online orientation help?

Elizabeth Goode

The University of Newcastle

Elizabeth.Goode@newcastle.edu.au

The University of Newcastle's online enabling program Open Foundation by Distance has been offered as a pathway into University since 2003. In 2012 a week-long online orientation, Week Zero, was integrated into the program's first semester. Evaluative measures indicate that the orientation has had a substantial positive impact on student engagement and experience. Attendance at online tutorials, interaction in discussion boards and rates of Blackboard access have all risen – with some measures of engagement increasing by more than 500 per cent compared to previous years. This paper discusses the impact of Week Zero on student engagement and experience during 2012 and 2013. It outlines areas of consistent impact across two years of implementing the program, and the effects of key redevelopments to the structure and content of the orientation in 2013. The paper also argues that despite Week Zero's sustained positive impact on student engagement and experience, an online orientation should not be considered a panacea for low completion rates in an open access, online enabling program.

Open Foundation by Distance is the off-campus mode of the University of Newcastle's longstanding enabling program for mature-aged students, Open Foundation. Originally a paper-based distance program, Open Foundation by Distance has been offered fully online via the Learning Management System Blackboard since 2012. A central component of the redesigned online program is the inclusion of a five-day online orientation, Week Zero. Week Zero is hosted in a program-level Blackboard site and delivered to all commencing students prior to the official first week of semester 1. The five-day schedule of activities and information in Week Zero was designed to introduce commencing students to their course and program Blackboard sites, each other, and critical support, administrative and academic staff. Expanding upon an earlier paper by Goode and Clark (2012) which described the structure of Week Zero and presented outcomes from its first offering in 2012, this paper discusses the orientation's impact on student engagement and experience across two cohorts of commencing students. Crucially, a number of redevelopments were made to the structure and content of Week Zero for its second offering in 2013. This paper therefore outlines areas of consistent and sustained impact across the first and second iterations of the orientation, discusses key changes made in 2013, and presents student responses to these changes.

Why Week Zero?

In 2011 the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle conducted an internal review of the Open Foundation by Distance program.

The review was prompted by concerns about student progression and retention in the program and drew upon the experiences of a team of academic, professional, teaching and executive staff. The review team concluded that students were not given adequate guidance about when and how to begin their courses, and were not consistently encouraged to interact with each other, with their lecturers, or with critical support services such as Learning Development and Counselling (Kavanagh et al. 2011).

Yet, as is frequently recognised in education literature, students entering enabling programs such as Open Foundation tend to have a multitude of needs and vulnerabilities (Bennett & Burgess 2011; Cullity 2006; Jeffrey & Hardie 2010; Orth & Robinson 2011). As mature-aged students returning to formal education, they can possess acute needs for support, information and encouragement. Enabling students typically face considerable identity and role adjustments as they rearrange their life to include study; lack the time management and academic skills required at university; and bring memories of negative educational experiences and other emotional and educational ‘baggage’ with them into their studies (Jeffrey & Hardie 2010). Enabling students also tend to lack cultural ‘know-how’ in a tertiary education setting and can grapple with entrenched and persistent feelings of ‘not belonging’ at university (Bennett & Burgess 2011).

Concurrent to these challenges, Open Foundation by Distance students face the additional complexity of undertaking their studies online. As online learners, they need to either possess or acquire – quickly – the communicative and technical skills necessary to navigate and interact effectively in an online learning environment (Cho 2012). This can be a significant hurdle for students who have not had much exposure, if any, to formal online learning. Becoming familiar with the technology is crucial, and if students are required to do so without support and/or while they are also trying to make sense of their course materials, feelings of being frustrated and overwhelmed, and eventually attrition, can result (Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, Shillington & Smith 2012).

Week Zero was proposed as a way of addressing and mitigating some of these challenges. A variety of literature has espoused the benefits of delivering an online orientation or induction for commencing university students at undergraduate and postgraduate level (Bozarth, Chapman & LaMonica 2004; Cho 2012; Gleason 2004; Keegan 2011; Motteram & Forrester 2005; Scagnoli 2001; Wozniak, Pizzica & Mahony 2012). Such initiatives have increased student confidence, reduced the number of technical difficulties impacting students’ academic progress, and facilitated community-building among groups of learners (Gleason 2004). However very little literature has focused on the effects of integrating an orientation into an online enabling program. To explore this further, this paper now turns to a discussion of ‘engagement’ and how Week Zero has impacted student engagement and experience across 2012 and 2013.

Engaging students through Week Zero: consistencies and redevelopments

As described in Goode and Clark (2012), increasing student engagement was one of the core aims of Week Zero. Engagement is conceptualised here as the “time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university” (Krause 2005, p.3). Indicators of engagement may include time spent attending classes

and studying privately, participation in university events and initiatives, and the frequency and quality of interaction with peers and academic staff (Krause 2005). Engagement may also encompass seeking involvement in active and collaborative learning processes, and affective dimensions such as “feeling legitimated and supported” as a university student (Beer, Clark & Jones 2010, p.76).

Critically, many of these features suggest that interpersonal interactions and connections are central to the measurement of student engagement. Debenham and May (2005) highlight three types of connections as being particularly crucial to student engagement and experience: students’ connections with course lecturers; links to support services and staff; and a rapport and connection with fellow students. Evidence of these three types of relationships, and of students’ willingness to access and utilise Blackboard, was noted to varying extents across 2012 and 2013. Some of these measures of engagement remained consistent across both years, while others were improved following a redesign of the orientation’s structure and content.

Creating a supportive learning community

Following the introduction of Week Zero in 2012, the volume and frequency of student interaction in online course and program discussion spaces has increased significantly (Goode & Clark 2012). As Table 1 demonstrates, the second iteration of Week Zero elicited similar levels of online student-to-student interaction to the first offering in 2012. Overall, given the smaller number of commencing students in 2013 (330 compared to just over 400 in 2012), the number of posts proportionate to enrolments *increased* in the second year of the online program. This consistently positive outcome reinforces the value of introducing students to online discussion spaces during an orientation period. Including activities that require students to interact with each other can translate the sense of enthusiasm and anticipation felt by many students at the outset of their academic journeys into the formation of dynamic and supportive communities. Importantly, the level of interaction observed in Blackboard sites *throughout* first semester indicates that an online orientation which focuses on building a ‘student community’ can affect student engagement in both program and course-level environments long after the orientation period.

Table 1. Discussion board posts during semester 1 in Open Foundation by Distance Blackboard sites, 2011–2013

	2011	2012	2013
Posts in program site during semester 1	32	1,900	1,352
Posts in course sites during semester 1	922	3,978	3,714
Total posts in Blackboard during semester 1	954	5,878	5,164

Students not only posted in their online discussion spaces more prolifically than ever before following the introduction of Week Zero, but they also commented repeatedly about the value they attributed to being able to interact online with other students. Student feedback in 2012 indicated that the opportunity to get to know others dealing

with similar circumstances and from like backgrounds was a highlight of Week Zero (Goode & Clark 2012). In 2013, students once again reported that the opportunity to interact with their peers during the orientation made them feel reassured, excited and connected to a community of like-minded learners:

The most interesting thing I have learnt this week is that there are a lot of people with the same commitments as me ie family and work. I no longer feel overwhelmed and I am now sure I have done the right thing in applying to do Open Foundation.

I'm enjoying reading other people's blogs and finding comfort knowing I'm not the only one feeling a touch nervous. Good luck to everyone, and a big thank you to other mums who are sharing their stories and helping me feel really positive :)

I learnt that I am not alone! Everyone's enthusiasm is really infectious.

Interestingly, staff felt that the sense of community and support engendered among students in 2012 was enhanced in 2013 by shifting interaction from Blackboard discussion boards to blogs. Staff felt that while serving the same purpose as a discussion board, the look and feel of the Blackboard blogs was closer to that of popular social network sites. Although speculative, this small change may have contributed to the more social nature of some of the interactions that took place in the latest offering of Week Zero. During 2013 it seemed that students became more comfortable with making connections online than they had been in 2012. Numerous students began to share stories, swap tips and contact details, and suggest forming offline study groups in their local areas:

Ok so I was thinking maybe if we have a post where everyone can comment what courses they are doing it might help us link up and figure out where we can get some help from. Also might help us get to know each other!

I will be studying Mathematics by distance which is very nerve racking. I live in Coffs Harbour and am hoping to get in to Midwifery at the end of this course. If anyone lives in Coffs and wants to organise a study session somewhere just comment! (:

This sense of community and support continued after students started to work with their course materials, with a number of students posting comments similar to the example below:

Noticed during the tutorial that a lot of people were stuck on this weeks material. I'm not a maths genius by any stretch of the imagination but i have a fairly good grasp on this weeks material. Does any one around the Port Macquarie area want to get together to study or form a study group. I know i'm going to need the help next week when we get to fractions!! :)

Connecting students and lecturers

Fostering connections between students and their lecturers was a focus of Week Zero in both 2012 and 2013. For each intake, video introductions from course lecturers were featured alongside course materials in Blackboard.

Student responses to these videos were consistently positive across both years. When asked in an end-of-Week Zero survey to nominate the most interesting part of the orientation, students commented that:

it was interesting listening to the lecturers and seeing that they really are just normal people. I had a preconception that Uni lecturers have are hard emotionless people

The most interesting things has been learning about the lecturers. Understanding that they are just normal people and they are genuinely here to help. Find out a little about who they are really helps to relate to them and make me feel at ease.

The most interesting thing I have learnt this week, is being introduced to all the lecturer's. I think they all seem lovely and have made me really look forward to starting OF knowing that I have their support.

During Week Zero in 2013, lecturers also posted a short welcome message in their course blogs. This appeared to allow students an extra opportunity to 'get to know' their lecturers, and students responded with appreciation and gratitude:

It's great to hear from you, and learn not just about your academic but also your personal life! :) I am a little intimidated tackling this course but after reading your post and watching your video I am feeling a lot more relaxed!

Engaging students with their course materials and their online learning environment

As reported by Goode and Clark (2012), the first offering of Week Zero significantly increased Blackboard access rates among commencing Open Foundation by Distance students. Promoting the orientation as the 'start point' of students' courses, rather than as an optional component separate to coursework, appeared to have been successful in encouraging most students to log in to Blackboard in the first weeks of semester.

In the second iteration of Week Zero these rates of access remained stable, reinforcing that the initiative was indeed highly effective at encouraging students to access their online learning environment. As Table 2 demonstrates, by the second week of semester 1 in both 2012 and 2013 94% of commencing students had accessed Blackboard – a significant increase on the 60% who had logged in in 2011.

Table 2. The percentage of commencing students accessing Blackboard by week 2 in first semester, 2011–2013.

2011	2012	2013
60%	94%	94%

Introducing students incrementally to different areas of Blackboard during Week Zero has been a key feature of the orientation since its inception. Students from both cohorts have consistently reported that this gradual introduction enabled them to feel more prepared and relaxed about commencing their studies:

By only revealing parts of blackboard each day has been great and not overwhelming. It has all really helped ease into the program.

the whole step by step guide has helped ease me into university life, and has really made me feel comfortable instead of worried.

However, despite these gains in access and technical competence, other aspects of student engagement were felt to be lacking in the first year of online delivery. Most notably, the number of commencing students who submitted their first assignment remained lower than staff had hoped for, attendance at online tutorials across the six distance courses was disappointingly low, and students did not seem to translate their guided experiences during Week Zero into proficient navigation of their course sites and timely access to important course documents and information.

Hence a number of key redevelopments were implemented for 2013. The decision was made to guide students incrementally into their course sites during Week Zero in the same way that they were guided in to the program site. It was hoped that this would give students ‘breathing space’ to spend time getting used to the sites without the pressure of weekly coursework, and allow staff to highlight important information before the commencement of semester. Additionally, instructional videos and words of encouragement and advice were embedded in several critical areas of the course sites. These videos included demonstrations of how to access and use the online tutorial system Collaborate and how to upload and submit assignments online. During Week Zero students were directed to watch these videos and complete a ‘trial run’ of accessing Collaborate and submitting a file online.

Subsequently, tutorial participation and submission rates for the first assignment both increased in 2013, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Rates of assignment submission and online tutorial attendance in first semester, 2012–2013.

	2012	2013
Rate of first assignment submission	71%	81%
Average attendance per online tutorial	5 students	11 students

Linking students to support services

One of the aims of Week Zero has always been to heighten awareness of the support services and staff available to students. As indicated in Table 4, the Enabling Counsellor and Foundation Studies Learning Adviser were contacted by Open Foundation by Distance students on only 17 occasions in 2011. In 2012, the Counsellor and Learning Adviser conducted more than 80 consults with online students. This has grown further in 2013, with preliminary figures presented in Table 4 indicating that more than 120 consults have been undertaken with online students. Fostering student contact with support staff has therefore been another area of consistent success across 2012 and 2013.

Table 4. Counselling and Learning Adviser consults with Open Foundation by Distance students in first semester, 2011–2013.

2011	2012	2013
17	84	126

In contrast, student engagement with other forms of support was lower than anticipated in 2012. In the first year of the online program, Regional Study Skills Advisers were recruited to facilitate regular face-to-face study help sessions in eight locations around NSW. While students who attended indicated that they found the opportunities to meet with Study Skills Advisers highly valuable, attendance averaged only 1.2 students at each session in first semester.

Consequently, the strategy for delivering face-to-face support in regional areas was rethought for 2013. What were fortnightly Regional Supported Study Groups facilitated by Regional Study Skills Advisers in 2012 became Face2Face Evenings facilitated by Study Advisers at three ‘critical points’ in semester 1, 2013: the beginning, middle and end of first semester. This new strategy was designed to more clearly reflect the role and value of the sessions. A video introducing the Study Advisers and describing how they could assist students at the Evenings was released during Week Zero, and students were encouraged to attend.

Table 5 shows that following these redevelopments attendance at the sessions increased significantly.

Table 5. Average attendance at face-to-face sessions in first semester, 2012–2013.

2012	2013
1.2 students	6.2 students

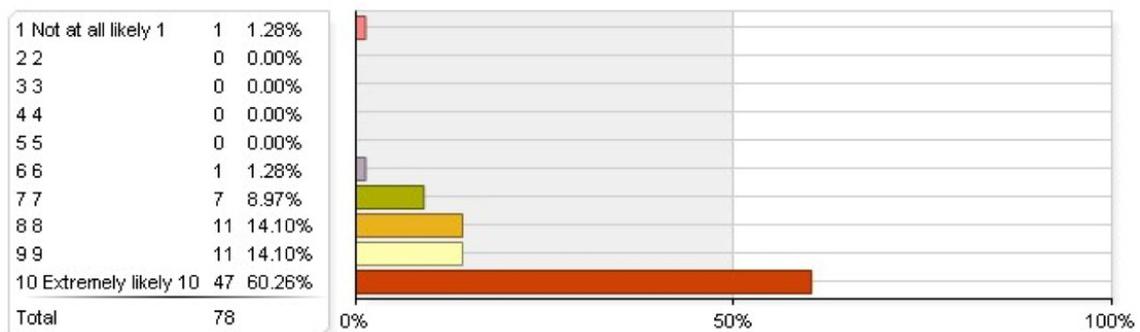
In sum, the effect of linking students with support services during Week Zero resulted in an increased uptake of these services, and of students’ confidence that they could succeed in their studies. As one student affirmed:

Throughout Week Zero I have found the constant reassurance and encouragement to be the most useful tool to be a successful student this year. Knowing there is an abundance of support and resources on hand has given me the confidence I desperately needed.

From engagement to retention

The evidence collected across 2012 and 2013 therefore indicates that Week Zero has had a substantial and sustained effect on student engagement and experience in the Open Foundation by Distance program. In an external review of Open Foundation in 2013, students overwhelmingly indicated that they would recommend the distance program to others (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. How likely would you be to recommend Open Foundation by Distance to family, friends or colleagues? Student responses.



It is noted in the literature that orientations for online learners frequently result in “the achievement of increased student enjoyment and confidence” (Wozniak et al. 2012, p.897). The student feedback cited in this paper provides strong evidence for this affective outcome. Through participating in Week Zero, students’ initial fears that they were going to ‘sink or swim’ without support were assuaged, excitement and enthusiasm was fostered, and valuable connections and supportive networks were forged.

However, staff involved in the development and redevelopment of Week Zero had hoped that introducing an online orientation would result not only in enhanced engagement and experience, but also higher rates of retention in the program. A strong link has been established in higher education literature between student engagement and retention (Gleason 2004; Tinto 2003; Zepke 2013). In this case, it was assumed that creating an engaging and supportive online learning environment would provide students with the technological skills and confidence-building experiences they required to complete Open Foundation by Distance.

Disappointingly, this was not the case. Although the *number* of program completions rose by 13% in 2012, enrolments also rose exponentially. Consequently, the retention *rate* among students who actively commenced the program fell by more than 5%. After redevelopments to Week Zero, student support structures, and the design of the program’s six courses in 2013, student retention appears to be increasing – but only very modestly (and these predictions may be pre-emptory, as at the time of writing students had not yet sat their final exams).

While it is outside of the scope of this paper to fully explore reasons for the seemingly contradictory outcomes of greater student engagement and a higher quality of experience on the one hand, and lower or stable retention on the other, in a preliminary analysis it seems that two factors may be worthy of acknowledgement and further exploration. First is the need to prepare students more comprehensively for the nature and demands of academic study. Tinto (2003) notes that disadvantaged students often withdraw from university due to an inadequate level of academic preparation. While a number of introductory academic skills activities were included in Week Zero, this was evidently *not enough* to prepare students for the intellectual and time demands of studying two 10 unit courses online while juggling a multitude of outside commitments and pressures.

Subsequently, the orientation period in Open Foundation by Distance is being extended to four weeks from 2014. Students will be encouraged to complete a three-week course, Academic Survival Skills Online, before commencing Week Zero and their Open Foundation courses. It is hoped that this extended entry will ease students more effectively into online study, and build in them an awareness of the conventions, expectations and academic skills required at university. The resources and activities provided in the course will remain available for students for the remainder of their enrolment and be referenced throughout their Open Foundation courses. In future iterations Academic Survival Skills Online may also be promoted as a tool that *prospective* students can use to self-assess their readiness to commit to the demands of study.

Second, a variety of evidence suggests that personal and external factors greatly affect whether students persist in and complete programs such as Open Foundation by Distance. Willans and Seary liken the experiences of mature-aged students returning to formal study as “akin to being hit from all directions” by a bombardment of physical, financial, cognitive and emotional challenges (2011, p.129). When facing such challenges, the development of personal qualities such as resilience, self-discipline and intrinsic motivation become critical to students’ progress and success.

Furthermore, survey responses from withdrawn Open Foundation by Distance students reveal that external factors appear to have a considerable impact on students’ persistence in the program. The three most common factors leading to withdrawal – as nominated by former students in 2012 and 2013 – are an increase in work commitments, demanding family and carer responsibilities, and illness or injury to the student or a family member.

Zepke (2013) contends that facilitating engagement in higher education is “a complex business” affected by a confluence of factors that may be personal, institutional and/or external in nature. Outcomes from the Week Zero initiative suggest that this is indeed the case for both engagement *and* retention. While initiatives such as Week Zero are potentially enormously valuable as an enabler of student engagement and participation, the evidence in this case suggests that an online orientation is *not* a panacea for low completion rates in an open access, online enabling program. It seems that while there is much we can control for online, mature-aged and disadvantaged students, there is also much we cannot. Attending to the “issue” of retention in programs such as Open Foundation by Distance may involve exploring more innovative and personalised approaches that take into account the multitude and complexity of challenges faced by mature-aged students seeking entry to higher education.

Conclusion

Integrating Week Zero into Open Foundation by Distance has resulted in substantial enhancements to student engagement and experience. Week Zero has fostered valuable connections and interactions among students, and between students, their online learning environment, course lecturers, and critical support services and staff. These findings have been strongly supported across two annual offerings of the program. In addition, several key redevelopments to the orientation’s structure and content have resulted in notable improvements to various facets of student engagement in 2013, including assignment completion, tutorial participation, and attendance at face-to-face

support events. Interestingly, parallel effects on student retention have been relatively modest. This supports the notion that student attrition in an open access, online enabling program is not easily countered by a single initiative or a ‘quick fix’ approach. Reasons for attrition, and measures that institutions can take to counter these reasons, are complex, diverse and worthy of further study in the fields of both enabling and online education.

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