David Pankratz

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Abstract

This article describes a project recently begun at Loyola University Chicago. The Language Learning Resource Center (LLRC) has developed a series of short films to teach students and faculty about the center and its resources. These films now comprise an "online orientation" to the lab, which replaces on-site group tours. The orientation includes quizzes to assess student retention of the key ideas, and the results go to all classrooms instructors so they can monitor their students' completion. Preliminary results are positive; high rate of online completion, few technical problems, more time spent by lab staff with individual users of the lab without the disruption of group orientations.

Online Orientations to the Language Resource Center

Warm-up Question: How do you inform students about your language resource center or related technology center?

a. Bring them into the center for an onsite orientation.

b. Give them a handout that refers them to center.

c. Rely on instructors to tell them about the center.

d. Provide online instruction about the center.

e. None of the above.

Correct answer: Depends on your center, your university, and your objectives. At my institution, Loyola University Chicago, the answer used to be a)—bring them into the language center for onsite group orientations. Now, the answer is d)—provide online instruction about the center and its services. In fall 2006 the Language Learning Resource Center (LLRC) provided orientations to nearly 1000 language students in digital video format, via the Internet.

Background

What motivated the change? First, with over 60 language classes, it became too difficult to schedule and deliver quality onsite orientations to our drop-in center, which consists of one large room. Second, ongoing orientations disrupted the users of the center at a time when they should have been becoming comfortable with using the center as a study place. Third, onsite orientations miss a major part of the target audience, including those absent that day, those who aren't paying attention, and those who are generally distracted, ah.....university students. Finally, we found that information given by various presenters, who in our case were often student workers, was inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate.

Project

To address these problems, beginning in fall 2006, instead of sending students to the lab for group presentations, nearly 1000 students in first, second and third-year language courses at Loyola University Chicago were required to complete an online orientation to the Language Learning Resource Center (LLRC). They watched 15 short videos, and then completed quizzes to assess their comprehension of the material. Their quiz responses were available to their classroom instructor and to me, the director of the language center. The orientations were required, and instructors were asked to incorporate quiz scores into their grading, at their discretion. All of this was accomplished by providing the orientations via special Blackboard courses set up specifically and exclusively for this purpose.

The project consisted of several phases. First, we scripted our video presentations and shot the scenes using student staff workers. Filming was tricky, and introduced us to the complexities of producing good quality video. I had completed one class in video production, and that provided the needed training. Next, we edited the videos using Final Cut Pro. One of the huge tangible benefits of this project was that the student workers learned not only video production but also video editing, skills they will take with them into their eventual careers. We produced 15 short videos, between one and three minutes each. Having the content divided into short films will allow us to re-use videos that are still relevant, and re-shoot topics which change. I estimate that we will have to re-shoot a few videos each year in order to keep up with the changes in the center and technology.

Next, we had to find a way to distribute the material to language students. I knew that students would not view the films "just because it's a good idea." So, how could we make them accountable? I concluded that they would need to be given quizzes to monitor whether or not they paid attention to the film content. I asked the student workers to write multiple choice questions and answers for each of the videos they helped script and shoot, and they came up with wonderful questions. I edited and narrowed them down, resulting in a total of 25 questions that hit at the core of what we want students to know about the lab, including opening hours, what type of information is available via the website, passwords they might need, etc.

Finally, we needed to find a way to monitor which students did the orientations, the quizzes, and how to keep track. We decided to take advantage of our course management system, Blackboard. I worked with the local Blackboard administrators to create a separate "LLRC Online Orientation" course for each language class. So, for example students in Spanish 101-001 had that Blackboard course as well as a "LLRC Online Orientation Spanish 101-001" course. Both the classroom instructor and I, as lab director, functioned as instructors for that orientation course. That allows us both to monitor student performance in the orientation course. Because on-site orientations to the center had always been required, it was not a big step to require that all students complete the online orientation. Instructors were asked, by the department chair, to incorporate the grades for the online orientation into the overall grade for the course. How they weighted it was left to their discretion.

Quick stats on results

A quick spin through some preliminary statistics shows that:

-Of the approximately 1300 students in language classes, about 1000 completed the orientations. Even though completion was "required," the lab had no direct way to enforce completion, nor did I want to become an enforcer.

-Of those who completed the orientation, about 85% of them scored highly (80-100%) on the quizzes. In other words, they actually watched the videos and gathered the information that was pertinent to using the center. We know from experimentation that students who choose to complete the quizzes without watching the videos score notably lower.

Observations

We believe that our new approach has some genuine benefits. We are certain that students get better, more compact and more accurate information than they did previously. The videos were produced carefully to transmit content as efficiently and clearly as possible. We are also confident that students actually learned more. For one thing, they have been made accountable for their learning due to the inclusion of evaluations—the quizzes. Staff workers have fielded fewer questions from confused students about center services than in previous years. We have the impression that a much higher percentage of students who come to use the center already know about its services and how to take advantage of them.

Actual usage of the center has increased compared to the equivalent period one year ago, as documented by a simple head count taken every thirty minutes. Students can now come to the center and study without fear of another group descending upon them when they are trying to concentrate. Lab student workers have been able to provide better individualized service to students without the distractions caused by group presentations, which typically went on over a period of several weeks. Finally, instructors are happy to have an "extra" hour of class time instead of allocating the time to accompany their students to the center. Overall, from my observations, the center has been a quieter but more effective learning place than it was at the beginning of previous semesters due to this change in orientation procedure.

Questions to be explored

We have noticed that the rate of completion for some classes is much higher than for others. Why is this so? Why are some students more motivated to learn about the center than others? Why are some instructors more motivated to encourage use of the language center than others? In other words, why did some instructors enforce completion of the online orientation, whereas others did not? I feel it may be related to the degree to which instructors feel the lab can help their students. There seem to be lower rates of completion among the classes for less commonly taught languages. These are questions I will be investigating.

Finally, what are the implications of a project like this for our future use of course management systems, such as Blackboard? Is this a good way to deliver information on a broad scale, to lots of students, in a way that monitors both completion and retention?

All of these questions get to the heart of what language centers do,

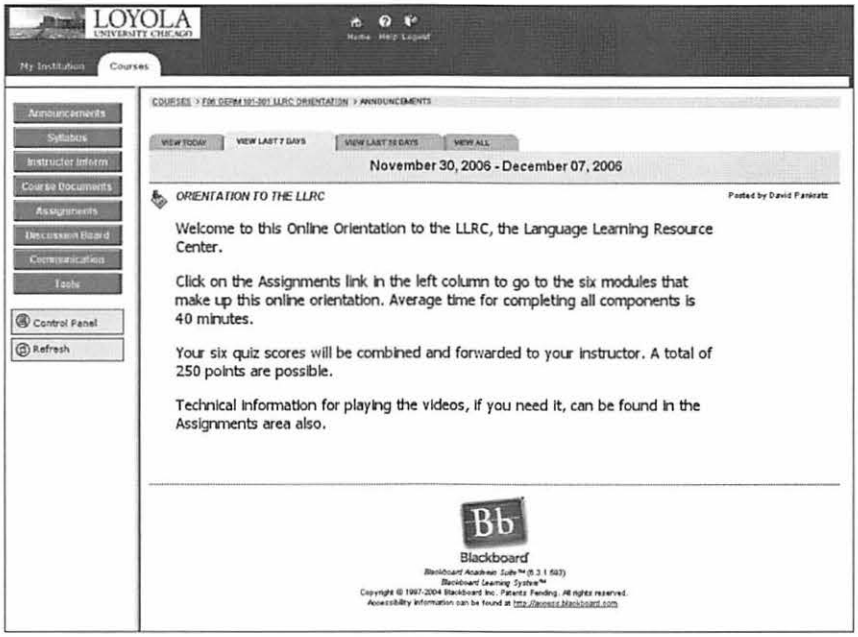
what they don't do, and what they could do better.

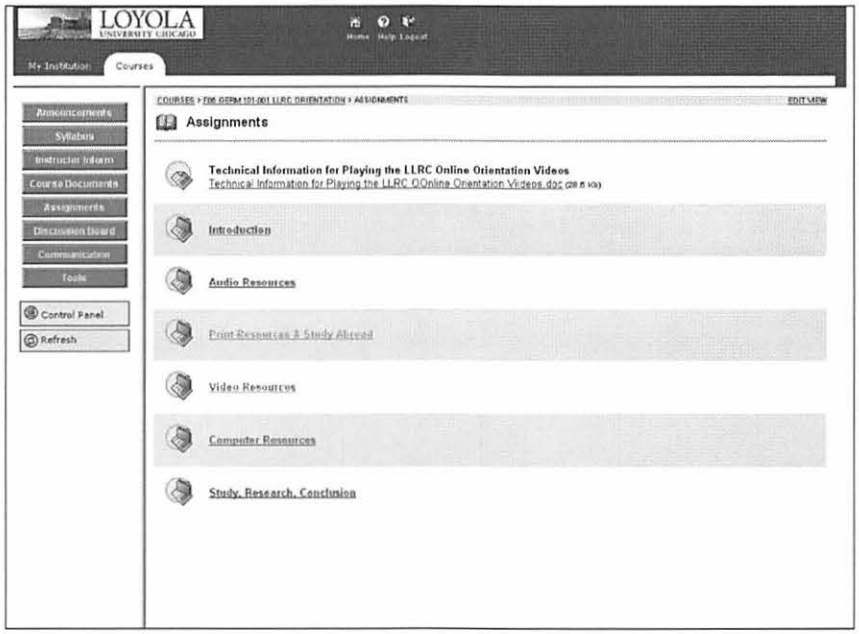
In Closing

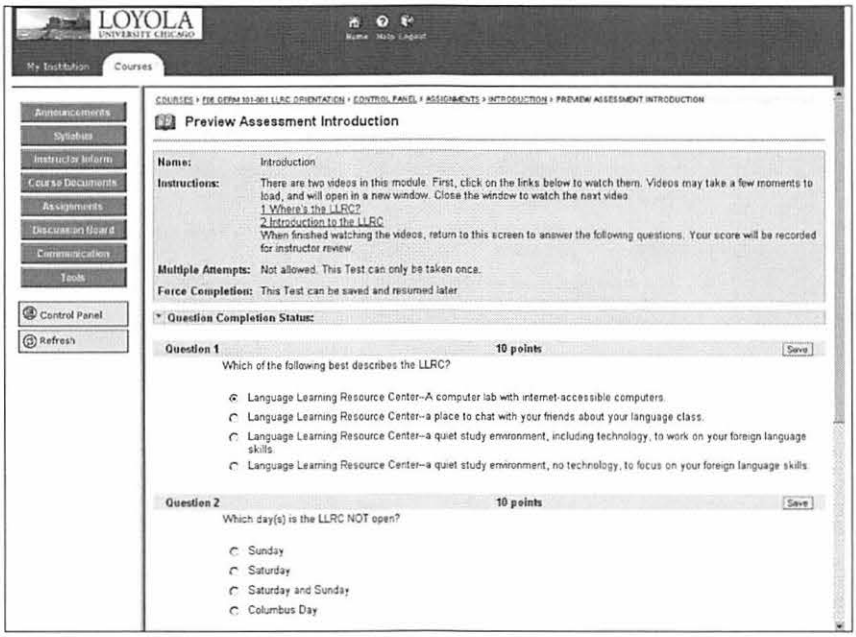
Well, that was my "Lab Note"—a printed description of a project that was essentially paperless, and one that makes compelling use of virtual media. Perhaps a fitting piece for a Journal that is going paperless. Go figure, as a dear colleague used to say.

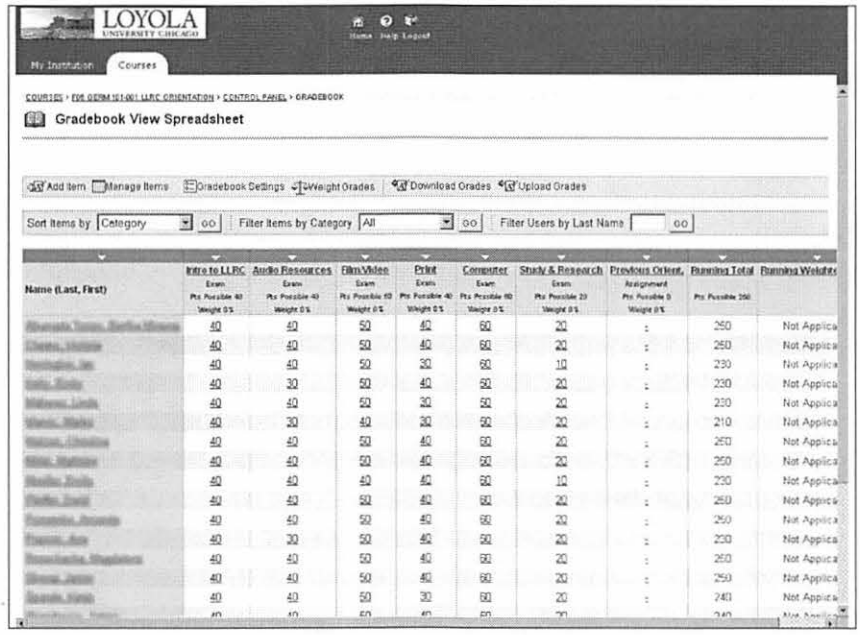
Appendix A:

Screen shots of the online LLRC Orientation Program at Loyola University Chicago






LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO
Home Help Logout
My Institution
Courses
Announcements
Syllabus
Instructor Inform
Course Documents
Assignments
Discussion Board
Communication
Tools
Control Panel
Refresh
COURSES > FIN GERM 101-001 LLRC ORIENTATION > CONTROL PANEL > ASSIGNMENTS > INTRODUCTION > PREVIEW ASSESSMENT INTRODUCTION
Preview Assessment Introduction
Name: Introduction
Instructions: There are two videos in this module. First, click on the links below to watch them. Videos may take a few moments to load, and will open in a new window. Close the window to watch the next video.
1 Where's the LLRC?
2 Introduction to the LLRC
When finished watching the videos, return to this screen to answer the following questions. Your score will be recorded for instructor review.
Multiple Attempts: Not allowed. This Test can only be taken once.
Force Completion: This Test can be saved and resumed later.
Question Completion Status:
Question 1 10 points Save
Which of the following best describes the LLRC?
Language Learning Resource Center--A computer lab with internet-accessible computers.
Language Learning Resource Center--a place to chat with your friends about your language class.
Language Learning Resource Center--a quiet study environment, including technology, to work on your foreign language skills.
Language Learning Resource Center--a quiet study environment, no technology, to focus on your foreign language skills.
Question 2 10 points Save
Which day(s) is the LLRC NOT open?
Sunday
Saturday
Saturday and Sunday
Columbus Day


LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY CHICAGO
Home Help Logout
My Institution
Courses
COURSES > FIN GERM 101-001 LLRC ORIENTATION > CONTROL PANEL > GRADEBOOK
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Manage Items
Gradebook Settings
Weight Grades
Download Grades
Upload Grades
Sort Items by Category
Filter Items by Category All
Filter Users by Last Name
Name (Last, First)
Intro to LLRC
Audio Resources
Film/Video
Print
Computer
Study & Research
Previous Orient.
Running Total
Running Weighted