



Elements of an Orientation

Time at the start of an activity or course that you can devote to orientating learners to the online space will not only help prevent frustrations later on, but will also lay the foundation for the social ties and trust that will build community.

The first three stages of [Gilly Salmon's five stage model](#) for online learning focuses heavily on such orientation activities as initial access, socialization, and sparking information exchange. The beginning of an online course or activity is where a facilitator can make a significant impact by the expectations they set, the activities they plan, and the communications that they model.

Simply allowing learners to access the online space to log in and look around, without any initial course material to engage with, can be beneficial for language learners. They can familiarize

themselves to the vocabulary of the navigation, the course goals, and assessment criteria. They can also use the time to establish digital literacy habits for that particular space – for example, checking in with the course announcements feed and the discussion forum used for introductions.

On the next page are some other orientation elements that you can become aware of and use to augment the space.

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Orientation Elements

WORKLOAD DISTRIBUTION

The more time you can allot at the start of a course for learners to get in and confront any log in or basic technology problems, the better. This may mean shifting around some course content to later sections of the course. Ensure that course workload does not overload learners at any particular point in the course or activity. Due to the text-heavy nature of online learning, language learners will always be susceptible to cognitive load limits – a unit or module with a particularly high workload may be difficult for learners to recover from, resulting in them having to play catch up with course material.

FILL IN PROFILES

Many online learning platforms have a profile space associated with user accounts. Encourage your learners to fill in in these profiles and challenge them to state their reasons for registering in the class and for studying English. This can promote ownership over learning and it can also help learners network within the class as they connect with people who share similar motivations for learning and similar professional and academic backgrounds. You may even want to make filling in profiles a small percentage of the course grade.

INITIAL INDIVIDUAL CONTACT

During an orientation period, if you can connect with your learners individually via such channels as email or telephone, it will help to establish your facilitator presence and help your learners in feeling more comfortable to establish their social presence. One-to-one communication early on in a course will let learners know that support is tangible and available. Additionally, small statements of appreciation, like thanking them for filling in their profiles, will let learners know that you are active in the course and will notice their activity even though it might not always be immediately apparent.

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INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL DISCUSSION FORUM

Create an “Introduction and General Discussion Forum” for learners to post non-discussion activity-related messages throughout the course. Regardless of formal online learning experience, many learners will come into the course with knowledge of discussion forum interfaces and will immediately have a place to connect and communicate with classmates. Additionally, during the course when discussion digresses off-topic, this forum is a place that you can suggest to learners to take their discussion. You can even use this forum for supplemental language learning activities and additional practice, or as an informal café if your forum supports chat.

INTRODUCTIONS

Require that learners post introductions of themselves. Not only will this help them to meet their classmates, but it will also serve as confirmation that the learner is able to log in and knows how to use the discussion forum. It may also serve as a window on their writing skill level, helping you to form groups or pairs of learners later in the course. Introductions can also be tied to a more purpose-driven activity – see the next point.

INITIAL ACTIVITY

Initial activities, sometimes referred to as “ice breakers,” can provide a vehicle for learners to engage with the course navigation and technology, flushing out any potential problems or learning barriers at the outset. Initial activities in online language learning can be similar to ones used in face-to-face situations, except in online environments they should force learners to engage with the digital space and course navigation, along with their classmates. See our resource [Introduction Activities for Online Language Learning](#).

