

# Student acclimatization in a net-based course with flexible entry

Leif Marklund

## Abstract

The Department of Interactive Media and Learning at Umeå University offers online courses about ICT and how ICT can be used for educational purposes. A new approach to gain more flexibility towards our students is to have a flexible entry into some of our courses. This means that the student can be accepted to start their work in a course during an ongoing semester, providing that the workload is manageable in the time remaining. Irrespective of when the students enter the course they must all finish at the same time, before the end of the semester. As students can enter a course at different times teachers feel an increased demand to have structured and accurate information that makes it possible for the student to become acclimatized to the course easily. The challenge is that students must be able to understand the course content, assignments and aims in order to be able to start their work in the course quickly.

This paper focuses on the student acclimatization process and how students have handled the information structure of the course “ICT for education”, a net-based course with flexible entry. The study was conducted by analyzing student reflection documents and student posts in the course communication platform as well as through a student survey and course evaluation at the end of the course. To introduce the students to the course we used written instructions in the form of a study guide and some short recorded video lectures.

The results show that almost every student in this course feels that the net-based course, compared with their prior experience of campus courses, demands more of the students when it comes to understanding the course content, assignments and aims. However, the majority of the students agreed that the teachers supporting the net-based course were more accessible when it came to answering student questions compared with teachers on campus courses. This specific result may indicate that perhaps campus courses could benefit from the way net-based courses are designed and that there might be a change in expectations from the student when it comes to the way campus courses should be designed.

For the students the most important source providing information about the course is the study guide. It holds information such as assignment descriptions, deadlines and practical information regarding the course. Other information sources used in the course are equally important for the students but many agree that the number of information sources within a course should be reduced as much as possible in order to make the course content, assignments and aims more easily to understand.

The questions asked by the students in an on-line forum as well as in their reflection documents regarding the course content, assignments and aims tend to decrease as the

course continues. This may indicate that the student levels of understanding of the course increase thereby indicating that the acclimatization process within the course is complete.

Some key questions for further discussion are:

- \_ What can be done in order to reduce the acclimatization time in net-based courses?
- \_ Which combined components lead up to the point where all students are acclimatized within a net-based course? Which components are most important to achieve this?
- \_ Does increased flexibility demand structure to retain quality in the course?
- \_ How can information and content be selected structured and presented to provide optimum support but avoid overload?
- \_ How can campus courses benefit from the way net-based courses are being designed?