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Freshmen e-orientation: Reflections of student organisers

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I. INTRODUCTION

Freshmen orientation programmes are important milestones of university life. In Dentistry, orientation helps build camaraderie and friendship among the small undergraduate student enrolment. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, freshmen orientation featured overnight camps, mass games and group activities which involved face-to-face interactions. With the pandemic, precautionary measures were put in place to curb the spread of the virus. A key measure was the radical move away from face-to-face activities. This had a profound impact on the conduct of the orientation programme in Dentistry. The authors share their experiences as student organisers of a first-ever online freshmen orientation programme (involving 72 freshmen and 60 seniors), and highlight key lessons gleaned from the experience.

II. E-ORIENTATION – CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Planning and implementing an e-Orientation programme is vastly different from that of a conventional face-to-face one. While the latter leverages physical space, infrastructure, resources, and interactions to create a conducive environment to achieve the goals of Orientation, e-Orientation operates in the online space and relies heavily on technology. However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a turn towards online platforms and tools for the execution of university orientation programmes worldwide (Ullman, 2020), and it was no different for students in the Faculty of

Dentistry. As the organisers and planners of the programme, the lack of prior experience with such an online approach proved daunting for us and the challenges we faced included:

A. Managing Unfamiliar Online Tools

While technology was widely available to support the e-Orientation, familiarity with it was lacking. It was therefore necessary to overcome a steep learning curve and get acquainted with the use of new tools such as Zoom, the video-conferencing tool.

B. Security, Privacy and Safety Concerns

A key concern with the e-Orientation revolved around security and privacy of the freshmen and seniors facilitating the online activities. Zoom was the platform of choice for our e-Orientation, due to its numerous security features, such as the usage of end-to-end encryption to secure meetings and the utilisation of meeting passcodes to ensure that only designated participants could access and enter meetings for e-Orientation (Zoom Communications Inc., n.d.). Additionally, with many of the activities taking place remotely online, the physical safety of the participants was also a concern if any of them injured themselves during the activities.

C. Sustaining Engagement of Freshmen

The long hours spent in front of the camera, coupled with the difficulty in engaging their peers over a virtual setting, resulted in participants quickly losing interest within a short time. The remote nature of the engagement also made it more difficult for the participants to deepen their interactions. The participants' focus could be easily lost with them disengaging from the activities going on online. There was a need for the seniors to constantly exude high levels of energy and enthusiasm needed to keep the freshmen engaged. The lack of reciprocation from the freshmen did little to encourage the seniors.

D. Grappling with Technological Difficulties

An online orientation opened the possibility of technological difficulties presenting a stumbling block to the smooth flow of the entire programme. While the impromptu nature of these occurrences meant these problems could not be entirely headed off beforehand, proper planning for contingencies allowed us to deal with these issues swiftly and effectively when they arose.

III. RISING ABOVE THE CHALLENGES

The e-Orientation was organised primarily using Zoom with each Orientation group comprising 10 freshmen and 2 Orientation Group Leaders (OGLs). This helped to optimise the group size and maximise the online interactions. Over a two-week period, the activities were rolled out for two to three hours on alternate days. The longer duration and shorter engagement each day was deliberate to avoid online fatigue and provide ample opportunity to informally catch up online in smaller groups after the official programme ended each day. The following strategies contributed to the success of organising the e-Orientation.

A. Drawing from the Familiar and Conventional

Traditional games were creatively adapted for adoption online. An example was Human Cluedo where the freshmen messaged their group mates an assigned word to initiate conversations on their own. In the classic game of Cluedo, players attempt to deduce words that are hidden in an envelope, with the player who guesses right winning. In our version of Human Cluedo, every freshman was assigned a word, and had to complete a "murder" by making 2 other freshmen, their "victims", say this word in their day-to-day conversations over text. If they did so successfully without arousing suspicion, they got a point for completing the "murder"! The "victims" on the other hand had to be wary and deduce the word that the murderer was trying to get them to say – the component of the game that was inspired by the original game. Inspiration was also sought from online games which the participants would be familiar with.

B. Experimenting with Newer Methods of Information Dissemination

While instructions could be given out efficiently through briefings in a face-to-face setting, this was not possible online. To reach out to the participants more effectively and expediently, an Instagram page was used to disseminate information quickly among the participants.

C. Empowering and equipping Orientation Group Leaders

An Orientation Group Leader (OGL) handbook was developed to guide the student leaders in running the programme independently. It accorded them the flexibility to make adaptations to some of the activities if it was necessary. Zoom meetings were organised to familiarise the OGLs with the use of Zoom and dry runs proved quintessential in foreseeing and eradicating potential technical difficulties.

IV. GOING VIRTUAL – A REALITY CHECK

Looking back on the e-Orientation, its success was the result of several values. First, the need to be open to new ideas and not discount any suggestions. The e-Orientation experience required new ideas to be tested to make sure these would still achieve the objectives of the Freshmen Orientation programme. Second, the need to see change as fresh opportunities. This also meant that any unexpected twists and turns to the original plans had to be embraced positively and recognised as opportunities to do something differently but with the potential to be better. Thirdly, perseverance proved an important ingredient in the recipe for success. With a major change to the original plans and being thrust into new unknowns, an easy way out would have been to cancel the orientation programme. This would have been an easier option, but not necessarily the correct one. The seniors persisted and rallied together to overcome the difficulties and eventually they succeeded in their foray into an online orientation programme. These values will go a long way in our training to become oral healthcare professionals of the future.

V. CONCLUSION

There was a palpable sense of apprehension and fear in the beginning. There were many unknowns – would the camp proceed smoothly? Would the juniors enjoy themselves? Would it be overly awkward? Many thought that an online orientation programme would not be as fun and would not achieve the intended objectives.

The willingness to be open to new ideas; a positive attitude towards changes and uncertainty, and a spirit of perseverance helped to overcome the initial fear and scepticism. While this e-Orientation was definitely not

on the agenda, its successful conduct has opened our eyes to how it could offer a viable alternative to the tried and tested conventional face-to-face programme. The convenience, accessibility and flexibility of the online platform, together with suitably designed online activities differentiated this Orientation into a unique experience, and possibly resulting in high participation rates among the freshmen.

With an eye on the future, the knowledge learnt through this experience can be passed on to the next batch of junior Orientation leaders, and may also come in helpful should we be involved in the organisation of online versions of regional events, such as the Asia-Pacific Dental Students Association (APDSA) conference, in the future. On a more personal note, this experience has also made each one of us more cognisant of pertinent issues inextricably linked to the use of social media, such as security and privacy, and will shape our behaviour on online platforms in the future as well.

If asked whether we would do this all over again, we would gladly step forth with a resounding Yess!!!

Notes on Contributors

Teng Chun Koh directed the project, reviewed literature and took the lead in writing and editing the manuscript.

Eugene Zhi Jie Lee contributed to the design of the project and ideas for this manuscript.

Charlene Jie Lin Yak contributed to the design of the project and ideas for this manuscript.

Jack Botao Sun contributed to the ideas for the project and this manuscript.

Joshua Ren Wei Tay was invited to make some brief corrections to the manuscript.

Ann Chong Hui Fong advised and provided feedback on the manuscript, aiding development of the manuscript.

Clara Yuen Pun Mok advised and provided feedback on the manuscript, aiding development of the manuscript.

All authors discussed and contributed to the final manuscript.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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