

## Exemplar 12

### Course area: General and Vocational Education (CGVE)

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This Exemplar illustrates that even young students, who are often stereotyped as being computer-savvy, may in fact lack confidence in using computers, and may need considerable face-to-face support.

I first got interested in the possibilities of online learning when I was teaching in small TAFE colleges in places like Leeton and Narrandera. After my time at Leeton, I moved to Albury, which is a bigger campus. Once there, I began taking more interest in the possibilities of combining face-to-face teaching with online.

In regional centres, you can get some small class sizes and, in a particular subject area, you may not have teachers with expertise in areas that only a few students want. So you need to think more flexibly, and to consider the alternatives. Online approaches can be very useful for subjects like this.

For example, suppose you've got students at Leeton, but the only qualified teacher in a particular subject like Science is at Albury. So the question becomes, how can you combine online learning with face-to-face in a way that gives students the best access to this teacher.

Perhaps your class can involve students from different locations, working off common materials and doing some of their work online. This is pretty much a 'virtual' classroom, but not everything happens online—there are a few students at each campus who work together face-to-face, and there is a part-time tutor who provides some support. Ideally, contact with the tutor is face-to-face and could be from a different subject discipline, although tutorial assistance can be provided online or by phone hookup from a 'subject expert'.

Most of the students I teach are doing Year 10 at TAFE (the Certificate in General and Vocational Education). Many are recent school leavers, while some have been out of school and now want to return to study. Most are in their late teens, although sometimes they are mature-age.

From my experience with these types of students, it is not appropriate to put the whole subject online. Often, they need help to stay focused. The purely text-based format of most online learning demands too much concentration and self-motivation as well as specific language and study skills. Spending at least some of their time working with other students in the same room feels more natural because learning is a social process. The online environment can also be used as a social support for isolated students in the use of a virtual classroom. Of course, as students become more used to working in this way, it may be possible to move from blended teaching that includes online support, towards fuller online delivery.

All online learning should progress like this. You start using online learning for support, but gradually, you expect students to take more and more initiative as they become more independent learners. For example, in subjects like Science, you get them to search out knowledge using the internet.

In the vision for CGVE Online, students will be able to socialise in the virtual classroom, and move towards looking at and downloading course material. This is an important feature for these students, whose attendance can be fairly variable. The ability to log in and download course materials means that no-one misses out.

This option raises the question of what constitutes satisfactory participation in courses offered partly online. This can be an issue when students have various financial obligations such as Youth Allowances. I'd be in favour of taking log-ins into account as one measure of course participation, and *Janison Toolbox* allows you the administrative tracking facilities to do that.

There is often an assumption around that all young people are great with computers. However, that's not my experience. In fact, when I was asking a few of my students about their knowledge of computers, their response was that they were too old (they were in their late teens!)—the ones really familiar with using computers were primary school aged.

The moral is—instead of making assumptions about students' knowledge of computers, talk with them about what they know and what their needs and interests are. Many of my students need some extra help with computing. I've found one way that can occur in the CGVE is by including computing in their Certificate subjects. They can use part of their time—perhaps 30 minutes per week—to get help with the computing aspects of their online learning.

We are at the point of training staff in teaching and moderating online, and in the use of *Janison Toolbox* and other software for the development of e-learning resources. However, the bottom line is funding, both for the development of resources and the online learning environment, and for the ongoing maintenance of this environment.

Most importantly, teachers need to be paid to teach online which, in many ways, is more time consuming than face-to-face classes. If the vision for online learning is to succeed, administration needs to get on board with the dollars, to make sure staff are being paid for the hours they put into development.

## Comments on my own learning...

At Leeton, I had embarked on a Masters Degree in Open and Distance Learning through University of Southern Queensland, to try to find out more. I'm getting to the end of that now. My final project is on the topic: 'E-learning and the 15 to 19 year old student—Towards making it happen in TAFE'.

Actually, studying online is something I would strongly recommend to anyone wanting to develop a better understanding of online learning. In particular, those who will be teaching or facilitating courses online will find *Introduction to Teaching Online*, or an e-moderation course, invaluable.

When you study online yourself, you experience how it works. I have learnt a lot from the Masters, and a number of subjects deal directly with teaching online and with web-based education.

Apart from the Masters Degree, which encourages you to communicate with and learn from your fellow students from all over the world, working in different educational fields, I have tried to learn more about online learning from a variety of sources. I took part in *NET\*Working 2002*, which was very useful. I made a lot of contacts, and gained quite a lot of knowledge and experience from the workshops.

I have also attended seminars at other Institutes, including a one-day session showcasing what Victorian TAFE has been doing using their TAFE Virtual Campus, and training in the use of software for managing online learning (*Janison Toolbox*). You also learn a lot from things you hear other people doing, and from your own experience.

I was part of a *LearnScope* project at Albury, and that was a particularly valuable experience. We set out to design a Virtual Learning Community (VLC) among staff members, based on the idea of Thiagi's Communities of Practice. The VLC 'classroom', or meeting room, was designed using the *Janison Toolbox*, with the assistance of our technical people at the Institute.

We wanted to ensure that the virtual classroom was supportive and fun. The whole point was to encourage our staff to learn online, and to chat with (and support) each other. Online learning is no different from face-to-face—the main way people learn is through dialogue with other students and teachers.

