

Exemplar 13

Course area: General and Vocational Education (CGVE)

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This Exemplar illustrates learner management issues, including co-ordinating classes, contending with different ability levels, and dealing with inappropriate student comments during chat.

I am involved in teaching the Certificate in General Vocational Education (CGVE) at Bega Institute on a part-time and casual basis. Our students are typically young people (15–19) who are returning to study on a full-time basis, although some are older. Students in each group have varying levels of ability, and many are highly intelligent. Programs like this cater to students who are considered ‘at risk’, since they dropped out of school before completing their formal education.

Our initial thought was that an online approach would be a useful addition to face-to-face teaching. So, with some colleagues, we decided to experiment with some online techniques, such as forums, email and synchronous chat.

Using funding we had received from TAFE’s Access Division, we set up the course. The course aim was to familiarise students with online communications and some of the learning potential of computers. We used a chat game, something like ‘Celebrity Heads’, which had been designed for base level computer users.

The course had some successes, but there were a number of challenges as well. One of the big issues was that in going online, we were immediately confronted by the different levels of our students. Some were very quick to complete the tasks and, because some have a short attention span, they quickly became frustrated. A few students in this category couldn’t see how the task we had given them was relevant.

When we first conducted the course, we tried to ensure that we were well-prepared. Even though there were only around 15 students, we had three teachers to look after the group, including one IT teacher. The classes took place in a computer lab with 20 or so computers.

Despite this level of resourcing, we were all flat out. Each of the teachers involved felt under enormous pressure, running from student to student, trying to keep them focused on the task and to sort out their difficulties.

Afterwards, the staff involved all met and reflected on what had been learnt, and on how we could build on this experience. Our plan was to extend beyond this single-classroom experiment, and involve classes on other campuses. So we called for volunteers, and got expressions of interest from people in two other centres.

Running the course synchronously across three campuses proved even more challenging. Just establishing a suitable time proved to be quite a hurdle. We made a few attempts, but only one other group came online each time. On one occasion, when we had finally settled on a suitable timeslot, the Institute changed the timetable to accommodate another group needing to use the Lab. Nevertheless, we persevered, and tried to learn from these experiences.

Probably the nicest thing about these experiments was to see the way some students engaged in the interaction, enjoying posting comments and receiving replies from their peers on other campuses.

There were some technical problems we had to deal with. For some reason, one of the IT guys helping us, moved the site we were using, but only some of us knew that. The result was that at one point, we had each campus logged on to, and trying to use, a different site. To be fair, though, the individual who did this, like the other staff involved, was giving us his time for free.

Then there were class management challenges. During the exercises, some of our students posted comments couched in very inappropriate language during a chat session. One can understand this behaviour, given that some would have only used home computers for recreational chat. Nevertheless, we quickly realised the need for an online moderator who can exclude people from the chat when appropriate.

It is also helpful to build in ways to deal with ability differences. Ideally, it is best if you can organise online work on two levels, one to cater to people with basic skills, the other for people who are brighter and have more substantial computer skills. Due to the nature of on-line communication, I recommend that the students should multi-task—that is, work on another computer based project while they are engaged in chat.

Comments on my own learning...

Some of my most valuable learning has come from experience. For one thing, the experience of being involved in teaching online has highlighted how many skills that you need to do it well. General computer skills are not enough. There are also scheduling challenges, technical problems, and class management issues. It is understandable that some of the teachers who worked on this initiative felt (and expressed) considerable frustration at times.

The initiatives I've been involved in have also given me ideas about how you can maximise learning from experience. For example, you should include a debrief after doing something new, so that people can go over what they've learnt and what they'd do differently next time. Often, a first attempt to introduce some online teaching will result in new learning which, in turn, is a springboard to trying out something more ambitious.

Right now, I feel a lot of excitement about the possibilities. In fact, we are currently developing a more complex, blended module dealing with CGVE English. This builds on the experience described above, but uses a situation that many students will be able to relate to—moving out of home, and finding a place to rent—to develop skills in areas like preparing business correspondence and conducting internet searches.

