

## Exemplar 15

### Course area: Health Worker Training

Melissa Mills

mgmills@doh.health.nsw.gov.au

Tamworth



This Exemplar illustrates the value of initiatives such as *LearnScope* and Flexible Learning as catalysts of changing mindsets and practices about training and learning.

I work for Learning Services in New England Area Health Service, which is one of 18 units that make up the NSW Health Registered Training Organisation. Up until two years ago, all of our training was face-to-face.

We offer a range of accredited qualifications—for example, training and assessment; aged care; project management; and frontline management for health staff and workers from other agencies e.g., Local Council, HACC. Our unit is also responsible for addressing other organisational learning needs, including first aid, fire and security.

We're the only unit in NSW Health RTO with a substantial involvement in flexible delivery. A typical course we run starts off with a half-day face-to-face orientation. We've tried doing this session by video for candidates who cannot attend in person, but it doesn't work. It is better to get everyone together. If people are not used to learning online, we show them what to do during the introductory session.

What happens after that depends on learner needs, skill levels (prior learning is formally assessed) and the course. If someone needs help, we give it over the phone. Learners also have on-screen instructions that provide guidance.

We give people various resources to support their online learning. Some of them can be downloaded from the intranet, others are distributed by CD. Where they're available, we use the ANTA Toolboxes, and put them on CD. For people who are not computer-literate, we also give out print copies of the material they need.

In a typical course, every month or two there is a face-to-face session, perhaps for a few hours. At the moment, we're assessing whether we could use videoconferencing for these face-to-face sessions during the course.

What you end up with in most of our courses is a mix of face-to-face and distance materials—online, CD, videoconference, and print. We also use a software program called Discus [[www.discusware.com](http://www.discusware.com)] to support asynchronous discussion groups with people studying for the same qualification. It works best when it is managed properly, and there is a reason for the discussion. Otherwise, you can run into problems with lack of structure. The online discussion can become just a meeting place.

In a lot of cases, the people who live in one town studying a course will get together. We don't organise it, the groups are self-starting and self-supporting.

The catalyst for us to go down the online track was a *LearnScope* project which I was involved in during 2002. You can use something like that as a driver of change. The project gives you the excuse, so you can say 'we've got to have X completed, because it is a condition of our funding'. The culture here is very difficult to change, so the *LearnScope* project helped a lot.

Over the last few years, we've trained a lot of trainers. In the New England region alone, we have several hundred accredited trainers and assessors. One of our priorities for the future is to harness these people, so that they're more directly involved in the training of others.

Another change that will happen in the near future will be the more widespread availability of broadband. Once that is in place, I expect us to make more use of videoconference, and for people to make more use of our internet site rather than using CD.

### Comments on my own learning...

I got interested in the possibilities of online learning through working in corporate HR roles. When I moved to health, it was quite a culture shock. There is a general tendency in the health system to only value classroom learning delivered by experts. There is little encouragement of self-directed learning. The view that 'if you're using computers at work, you're playing' doesn't help much either.

I've pushed in the opposite direction. I've been fortunate to have the leadership and support of a dynamic and visionary manager, and we've tried to move training away from classroom delivery towards self-directed learning.

I'm a *Flexible Learning Leader* at the moment. Just as I did with *LearnScope*, I've tried to use the Leader role to drive change. For example, we've just finished putting a large group of 100 educators through a course in how to learn online, and we've got a waiting list of others who also want to do it. The next step is to develop a change management plan for flexible learning for the NSW Health RTO.

One thing this type of course has reinforced for me is that you need to actually experience online learning to appreciate how it works. Actually doing it opens your eyes!

