

Exemplar 17

Course area: Information Technology

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This Exemplar illustrates ways of making learning involving, interactive and, most of all, fun.

I teach various computer subjects in a Community College, as part of the Certificate III in Information Technology. My students are a mixed bunch. Some are young people completing high school, some are people who have left school and are now coming back to study in an effort to improve their job prospects, but by far the largest group are people over 30 (and even as old as 60 or more). Most of them, particularly the older ones, are paying their own way, and are very motivated to learn.

A lot of my students are not very computer literate when they start off, so my focus is on making things easier for them and providing as much support as possible. That is where it is good to back up the face-to-face classroom contact with online support.

Take a subject like ‘Website Design’. Students might be given a task to do between classes, such as:

- find the best and worst websites you can
- post them for others to have a look at
- evaluate each other’s sites in an online discussion with other class members.

Students are expected to participate in forums and email groups between classes, and a task like this generates a lot of online discussion. It usually works very well. Between classes, people do their research, then display their results. After that, they have a look at what others have come up with, and comment on it.

I think it is a good idea to let students continue to participate in class discussions even after they’ve finished the subject. In the case of Website Design, I have ex-students who have designed interesting sites, and I encourage them to post these for current students to have a look at. Occasionally, one of these ex-students will ask me a question online, but that doesn’t happen very often. The benefits of their continued involvement far outweigh the occasional bit of extra work.

Another subject I teach is 'Database Creation'. This is a subject where there are often a lot of questions, as people get the idea of designing their own databases. I try to hang back a little from answering these directly. Instead, I create the expectation that students will help each other work through their problems. By doing so, they learn a lot more.

The way we manage all of this is using a free site available to anyone, www.groups.yahoo.com. This has a lot of features that suit classes like mine. If you set up a group on this site, it can be password-protected, and you can stop yourself from being bombarded by advertising emails. You can even prevent other people who visit the site from knowing that your group exists.

The site allows you to post website addresses of interest, so that others can have a look. A big advantage is that you can allow participants in your group to upload files. For example, in the Database course, a student can upload a database they're working on which has some design problems. Others in the group are encouraged to have a look at the screens and the code, and suggest improvements.

I think one of the most important things in blending online and face-to-face teaching is to make the learning fun. It sounds easy, but a lot of courses are not fun at all. I'm very aware of that at the moment because I'm studying a post-graduate course in online learning at one of the universities, and it is as dry as bones!

I try to make my classes refreshing. Many teachers would agree that you're not there just to instruct, to dish out knowledge. Instead, good teaching is about facilitating learning, and encouraging students to be self-directed. But I think even that is not sufficient. You need to demonstrate that learning is a good experience, that learning is fun.

After all, when you think back later on a course, you don't only remember what you learnt; you also remember how you felt in the group, how much you enjoyed the learning.

If you handle online learning properly, students won't realise how hard they're being pushed. They don't feel the pressure because they're having a good time. They want to learn more! That's when you see the real lifelong learning concept.

Another principle I think is important is to recognise (and value) the fact that different people have different preferred learning styles. In the online environment, that means accepting the different ways that people get involved, and presenting the material in various ways to cater to these differences.

For example, some students are comfortable putting forward their ideas off the top of their head during a chat session, whereas others hold back. But in some of my courses, we include the requirement that everyone has to record their reflections about what happened during the week and what they've learnt. Typically, the people who are reluctant to participate in chat sessions are quieter, more reflective types who come up with some very insightful comments once they've had time to think.

Another example of catering to differences is to provide readings that people can download, with structured exercises where appropriate. This suits people who like everything to be well-planned and clear. It complements the more informal style of online forums that we also use.

Things are going to keep changing in the online learning area. When I look into the future, I can see the boundary between 'pure online' and 'blended learning' breaking down. After all, with improved bandwidths, it will soon be possible for students to see each other and their teacher, so all online learning will always include face-to-face dimension.

Comments on my own learning...

I've had a lot of very good learning experiences. I started experimenting with online teaching three years ago after being a participant in one of the *LearnScope* projects in our region. This was very much at the grassroots level, investigating what online learning is all about. During that time, I also attended a conference, and some of the presentations I heard really grabbed my attention.

Things I did during the last two years have built on the *LearnScope* project and on my early experiments. I subsequently did a course funded by *LearnScope* on how to teach online. This year, I was one of the facilitators of this same course. I've also been involved in projects designed to get other teachers in the ACE sector to go online.

A lot of my learning has come from mistakes or difficulties. When you first run part or all of a course online, you can feel a bit at sea. It is certainly not the same as teaching in the classroom, where you can tell from someone's body language that they're struggling. When you're online, it can feel more disjointed. Yet, most of my students have loved the online component of their learning. I've had some great feedback. One recent group has banded together and convinced the College to run the course again next year, this time at a higher level.

I'd always suggest to another teacher that the best way to learn about online learning is to experience it yourself. That is where *LearnScope* projects and courses are great. They give you a good idea of what it feels like, and how much fun it can be.

