

## Exemplar 18

### Course area: Information Technology (Software applications)

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This Exemplar illustrates using forums, and providing answers to Frequently Asked Questions, in order to limit email demands on teachers.

I'm course manager Certificate III in Information Technology (Software Applications) which is run through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). At OTEN, you can study many IT courses including Cert III level, and some of the modules from the Cert IV and Diploma.

Students who enroll in these modules will probably never come together face-to-face. Actually, this year, we did offer a face-to-face induction for the Diploma students, but very few of them were interested. Remember, these students may be located anywhere in Australia or overseas.

The course is highly flexible—you can start at any time during the year. It is also completely self-paced. As long as you keep meeting the assessment requirements, you can move through as fast as you want.

The course consists of 24 modules. The first 12 modules are offered in the traditional way, print materials which are mailed out. People like print and they like it sent to them. Even if these first modules were on *Janison*, students would not find it easy to print them all off, because of the way they're structured. You'd have to go into every section and print it off separately. It would take a lot of time!

Once the student completes their assessment requirements for the paper-based modules, they would notify us and we'd move them on to the next part of the course, which runs online. This second part also has 12 modules, some of which are compulsory, others are electives.

The second, online part of the course is delivered using the *Janison* platform. Within each module, there are forums that students can participate in. One student might post a comment or question, and others will respond. I've found this part of the course quite refreshing, a good form of peer support.

The course facilitator would tend to hold back from these exchanges, to see what develops. If a student posts a query and no-one responds over a week or so, the facilitator may hop in and take part. But more usually it is other students who take part. Amongst the students, there are also a few boffins who get very involved, helping other students through the forum. It's marvellous, and helps us.

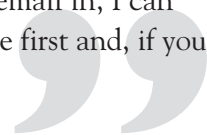
We also find the forums useful because they indicate what students are having difficulty with. On the other site students have access to [namely, [ols.oten.edu.au](http://ols.oten.edu.au)], there is a section for answers to Frequently Asked Questions for each module. The forums help us sort out what FAQs to include.

Some people only have work emails, which they can't use, and some have email addresses through free sites like hotmail.com. They're not suitable because of restricted memory, and therefore the numbers of emails and sizes of attachments they cater to. Free email sites also attract a lot of junk mail, which means they fill up quickly.

There is no set textbook for the course, although we suggest references. But mostly, they learn from our notes and doing the exercises. Even though we suggest they do these exercises and activities, the student must complete the assessment tasks for each of the modules in the course.

Emails are a huge, time-consuming exercise for us. Particularly at the beginning of the year, email is extremely busy. We have a separate email account for each of our OTEN courses. A student in Cert III will email that account, and it is up to the course manager to go in and respond.

As you could imagine, there can be a lot of duplication of questions and answers. That is why we are putting a lot of effort into setting up a more comprehensive set of answers to Frequently Asked Questions. It will mean when they email in, I can direct them to a forum in *Janison* or to the FAQs and say: 'look there first and, if you still can't figure it out, come back to me.'



## Comments on my own learning...

This year, I've been doing the *FAMe* course through the Professional Development Network. It has had quite an effect on my thinking about the IT Online courses. Not that it all applies. My situation is very different from most of the other people doing *FAMe*. At OTEN, we're totally flexible. We can't give help face-to-face. And we don't have a 'group' of students going through together, because we enroll people right through the year.

However, *FAMe* has opened my eyes to lots of ways we can streamline what we do here. I'm definitely going to change a few things next year.

One of the things I am going to do is give out a timetable at the start of the year. Even though they don't have to stick to it, it will at least be a guide to what they should be doing when.

Another thing I'll do is to exercise more control over students going into the online modules, by only enrolling them in groups, maybe one group every fortnight. Hopefully, each group will see themselves as buddies, and help each other.

Something else I got out of *FAMe* was that this year, I ran their 'five minutes of *FAMe*' exercise, where everyone tells everyone else a little about themselves. I thought it was fantastic what eventuated from this! It led to a few peer support groups. As they read the profiles of students over 50, some of the students said 'I'm over 50, too!' Out of that, they started a '50's Onliners' group. Then there was a group at Bateman's Bay who got in touch through the exercise, and now they have a peer-support meeting every fortnight at a local restaurant.

I also like the way in *FAMe* that everything is highly structured. Every week, on the same day, an email update is sent out, to let you know where things are up to.

I think that's good. That is also something I'm going to do with my group next year. There are going to be regular announcements. Just like a little prompt, to remind them that I'm still here, that I'm interested.

