

## Exemplar 19

### Course area: Information Technology (Programming and software development)

Phillip Johnston

phillip.johnston@tafensw.edu.au

TAFE NSW—  
Sydney Institute



This Exemplar contains many suggestions for promoting and conducting a subject for sophisticated computer users online.

I've been involved in online delivery of programming and software development subjects at TAFE NSW—Sydney Institute since the mid-1990s. Over this long history of delivery, I've build up a perspective on what works and what doesn't. Really, this history is the basis of our current success.

I think there are a number of keys to successfully running a subject online. The way you sell the online option is important. I've seen subjects where online delivery is the last option, the one students do when class groups are full. You can imagine the result! The students you get are the ones who are slow to get their name down for face-to-face classes. It can lead to dissatisfaction and high drop-out rates.

We've tried to do the opposite with my subjects. The online option is presented as high-status, challenging, for people who are highly self-directed. And there's a huge motivating factor: by studying online, you cut six months off the time it takes to complete the Diploma. If students don't want to study the subject online, they can always do it face-to-face and stay enrolled for another six months!

It is also important to provide a very clear structure and guidance right from the start. When students start out, we give them a very good online student guide. That contains all the rules about communication with staff, expectations of participation, and assessment requirements.

At the beginning of the course, each student has to come in and do an orientation session. They learn about things like using TAFE's online platform, *Janison Toolbox*. This initial contact is very important. You can immediately see, from the look in their eyes, which students are going to have difficulty working online, so you can take steps to help them.

We've found that it is also essential to limit demands on teachers, so that student expectations are realistic and teachers are not overwhelmed. We do a number of things there. For example:

- for material to be considered by the teacher during scheduled online chat sessions, it needs to be received at least 48 hours before the session. We also make sure that queries are dealt with in the order they're received, which gives an added incentive to submit work early

- students are required to include the name of their subject, and the topic of their query, in the subject line of the email. This has a few advantages. It means that the teacher can sort emails into folders without having to open them. It also means that if a number of emails arrive with the same query, the teacher can issue a broadcast email to clarify the issue for everyone.

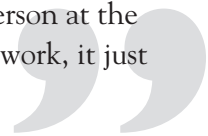
The social side of learning is also important. Our students know each other, they've been in classes together. When they do our online subjects, there are already groups and relationships. It means that, quite naturally, they work together and help each other if they get stuck.

Another important factor is the quality of your online materials. We looked at the existing TAFE materials that were available, but ultimately decided to use existing textbooks for most of the content. We were lucky, because in our face-to-face teaching, we'd been using textbooks which were very clear and didn't need much extra input from the teacher. We use these same texts with the online group, and it works well. The teaching staff can then concentrate their efforts on mapping, supporting and assessing the learning.

The online version of the programming/software development subjects is completely self-paced. We provide students with a learning map, which lists the criteria they need to satisfy in order to finish. The map also guides them through the text and refers to resources they can download, from *Janison Toolbox* or elsewhere. We use the online medium to exchange documents with students; to send and receive messages; and for chat sessions. Actually, we haven't used chat much. Our students are intrinsically motivated, they're good independent learners, so they don't need to rely that much on chat.

In running subjects like this, the quality of your teachers is very important. I've selected teachers who can work effectively online. Not only are they keen, but they're oriented to computers and technology. You need that human resource.

For anyone who wants to teach these subjects online, I've insisted that they first do the training in using *Janison Toolbox*. It is run by the technical IT person at the Institute. That's essential! If the teacher is not confident, it doesn't work, it just leads to a lot of frustration.



## Comments on my own learning...

I've learnt about teaching online from a variety of sources. Back in 1992, I studied online education through University of Technology Sydney. I've also learnt a lot through managing a very large bulletin board, something I've done as a private interest.

I've also learnt a lot from the experience of managing the programming and software development subjects. Each time we've offered them online, we try to improve on what we did the previous year.

I've learnt from negative experiences. I did a distance course some years back, in which assignments were lost, and feedback was very slow. From that, I learnt the value of being organised, and of quick feedback. We've prepared worked answers for a lot of our assessment tasks, so when a student submits something like a spreadsheet, the teacher can easily compare it with the correct one and provide comments.

Looking forward, I don't see courses being run purely online. Total online delivery is doomed to failure. There are lots of barriers to courses being delivered fully online, including equity issues—not everyone has access to a computer. There is also the issue of choice. Online should continue to be one option, rather than the only option.

