

Exemplar 21

Course area: Management Communication

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This Exemplar illustrates that you can build in too much flexibility and too many options, with negative results.

I have been involved in developing a flexible model of study for the Graduate Certificate in Management Communication. This course is designed to meet the needs of people from a wide range of backgrounds working in middle management positions. It covers competencies in subjects such as written and oral communication, interpersonal skills, teambuilding, organisational communication and conflict management. We've been running the course in a fairly traditional way, with face-to-face classes, for the last few years, typically with a group of around 15 students.

Over this time, we began to appreciate some of the difficulties that our students face. Many of them are middle-level managers in demanding jobs. They often have families, other commitments and work long hours. So it is a big ask for them to attend campus each week. We were also aware that a number of people interested in the course lived too far away to attend classes regularly.

Mainly because of that, we decided we'd make more use of online learning this year. We wanted to combine weekend workshops, tutorials and online support in a way that met everyone's needs. Despite the fact that we've all put in lots of energy, we have had problems keeping students involved and motivated. We've just about burnt ourselves out trying to be supportive and flexible. But let me explain what happened.

For this year's group, we developed a website incorporating things like chats, forums and the ability to upload and download files. We also received some R&D funding to develop study guides for each module. These explain what the learning outcomes are, the assessment tasks (as far as possible, these are work-related), key concepts, and references to readings. They include some thought-provoking questions to encourage reflection and to get students to respond via the forum.

A guiding design principle was to have multiple options, with as much flexibility as possible. For example, key readings were available on a CD which we gave everyone, but they were also available on the website. Workshops were recommended, but not compulsory. Forums were recommended but, again, not compulsory. And while students were encouraged to visit the website to keep up-to-date with course information, they didn't have to—we also emailed all announcements directly to them.

So much for our intentions! As you can see, we tried to cater to all the possibilities, and be highly flexible. Now I'll tell you what actually happened.

To start with, we only had a small group enrolling, with only twelve coming to the first residential. While the residential itself went well, with students expressing great enthusiasm for the course and the website, participation in the online part never really took off.

Lots of the options were not used, or underutilised. For example, forums were not used much, and students quickly lost interest because others were not involved. Similarly, if you did venture into the chat room, you'd find yourself the only one there, a very lonely place. And, in the case of on-campus tutorials, generally only one or two people attended. With face-to-face teaching you can pick up problems quickly, provide lots of feedback and encouragement. Without this interaction we found students dropping out gradually as their own work loads grew.

As this has been happening, we've been spending a lot of time thinking about where we went wrong. The whole experience has taught us a lot about what to do (and not do!) when you're introducing online components into a face-to-face course. So, what do we plan to do differently next time?

The first thing we'd like to do is make sure our teaching staff are properly trained in online facilitation. Even though we were all interested in the possibilities of online, none of the facilitators had any first-hand experience in running an online course. Having gone through it once, the first thing we'll do differently, before we run it again, is make sure our teaching staff have solid, first-hand experience as online facilitators.

Next time, we'll also try to increase the size of the group. We found that online courses don't work very well with small numbers of students. Next time, we need to promote the course to a larger market.

We are also trying to reduce the number of options. For example, some material will only be available from the website, which will force the students to engage with the site. And we may make it compulsory to participate in forums.

Another thing we realised is that when you teach online, you still need to do what you do in class: push, direct, encourage, inspire. Next time, we won't be waiting for students to phone us, we'll be calling them directly to check on progress. And we won't be waiting for them to find their own learning partners—we'll be more active in assigning them to groups at the outset.

We've also realised that we need to tighten up the teaching effort. That will mean next year, we'll have fewer facilitators on the course. We're after a smaller group of staff who work more closely together to integrate subjects.

We need to find ways of rationalising the assessments, and minimising duplication. At present, it's very bitsy, with lots of modules, and lots of assessment tasks. I think what we'll end up with are a few carefully designed projects that cover all areas.

And finally, next time we'll make sure we provide enough structure. Instead of being flexible with deadlines, we may need to put more pressure on students earlier in the course. Extending due dates doesn't always help students, as their workload snowballs towards the end of the course.

Comments on my own learning...

This whole experience has been a huge learning experience, even though the outcome this year is a disappointment. In some ways, it's a form of 'professional development', and a very valuable one.

Three colleagues and I also did a course called *Teaching and Learning Online*, run by Riverina Institute as part of the Graduate Certificate in Flexible Delivery. Each of us had completely different reactions to it. These ranged from one colleague with little computer experience who found it 'dreadful', to another colleague who had IT qualifications and who found it 'wonderful'. It highlighted that different people experience things differently. The result was that we were determined to build plenty of flexibility into the Graduate Certificate. It's a good aim, but perhaps we went too far!

I'm also doing one of the communication modules myself as a learner—'communications for change management'. This is being run by the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) for communication teachers around the state. I'm doing it with the idea that, ultimately, I can deliver it myself.

Right now, I'm doing a Masters Degree in Education (Adult) at the University of Technology Sydney—you can do it by distance mode. This course also got me excited about the possibilities of online learning, as online forums have been used successfully for student reflections and sharing information.

I've also learnt from the weaknesses of the UTS course. In one subject, the facilitator was involved in the forum at the beginning, but then backed off. It left us all wondering what was going on, and we found it quite frustrating. Obviously, the facilitator needs to stay involved.

I'm very interested in the staff development process. A key challenge is to develop good online facilitation skills. How do you do it? *FAME* is quite good, but I think you need more than that. You need others to think about it with you, to reflect on lessons face-to-face. So you really need a blended approach to learning online facilitation. You can't just sit at your computer by yourself and learn to facilitate an online course!

