

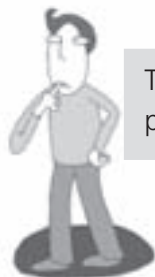
Exemplar 22

Course area: Retail Operations

Nicki Sleeman

nicola.sleeman@tafensw.edu.au

TAFE NSW—New
England Institute



This Exemplar gives a clear outline of ingredients that led to a successful program for indigenous school students studying Retail Operations.

I am involved in the delivery of a pilot course (Certificate II in Retail Operations) to a group of Year 11 Indigenous school students studying retail as part of the Higher School Certificate. The students are based in small towns spread across the North West region of NSW. I teach on other retailing courses that are delivered online as well, but I'll just talk about this one.

These students have just completed a Certificate I in Retail Operations and started Certificate II. All of them have indicated that they would like to sit for their HSC Retail exam. In fact, there is a whole career path to pursue if they wish. If they undertake the remaining two elective modules within the Certificate II, they can then progress to Certificate III. At that point, they may be employed as a Retail Trainee at supervisory level. Next, they can progress to Certificate IV in Retail Management, Diploma in Retail Management and then gain a 50% credit towards a Bachelor of Business at selected Universities. I am hoping that these students will secure either a traineeship or full-time employment at the completion of Year 12.

The pilot course resulted from an enquiry from the Principal of Boggabilla Central School for information about whether we could deliver the HSC Retail Course to a group of indigenous students attending the school. I was able to gain approval for funding, and several other schools joined the program.

There are five main ingredients which have contributed to the success of the course.

Firstly, the learning resources which have been developed and delivered using the Internet. Students access these from their schools, using Internet Explorer. In the initial stages of the course, it was crucial that the schools participating in the course had Internet access. From past experience, I'd learnt that without adequate bandwidth, the process is too slow, resulting in learner frustration.

Secondly, face-to-face sessions have been built into the course each term. The students, mentors and I meet at a central location to reinforce the learning that has occurred online and to conduct assessments.

In planning these sessions, I had to take into account the location of the students and the distances involved. The first face-to-face session was held at Moree, which was about half a days travel for all who participated. For some of the students, this was their first trip outside their home towns, so it was very significant for them. They stayed overnight in a caravan park, and had the session with me the next day.

I covered a range of areas, including job-seeking skills; writing job applications on the computer; personal grooming; and interview skills. It was not only of enormous value in preparing students for work experience, but also enhanced the growth of their own personal development!

The second session was at Walgett, a bit further for me but not so far for some of the students! These sessions have proven to be invaluable, in that they nurture group cohesion and provide the ideal opportunity to address any problems that either students or mentors may be experiencing.

Thirdly, I have support people at each school. There is an aboriginal educational assistant, and a [non-indigenous] mentor who supports learning and delivery. Some of the mentors go beyond the call of duty to ensure that students make it to class. For example, they'll go and pick up students and take them to class if their attendance falters.

The fourth ingredient is weekly teleconferences. Each of the mentors sit in on the class during the teleconference, encouraging discussion by reflecting on personal experiences and providing support. Getting the discussions going wasn't easy at first—it was like pulling hen's teeth. However, there has been a dramatic improvement in the student's oral communication skills.

The final ingredient, which gave my students an opportunity to observe first-hand what they had been learning about, was a fully funded excursion to Brisbane. We visited and examined operations at the major shopping and distribution centres. It was just fantastic, one of the best student excursions I've been involved in! Given that many of the students had not travelled before, they coped remarkably. From the start, I used the excursion as a carrot: "If you get through the first three terms, you will be rewarded with a an excursion to Brisbane"!

It is important to give the students feedback on their online activities as soon as possible, so that they feel motivated to continue. This also helps you know if students are experiencing any technological problems or whether they may need some extra tutorial support. If they miss a few classes or stop participating, I also ring them at home. Doing so gives me an opportunity to speak to them on a one-to-one basis. By doing this, students realise that you really do care about them!

I also ring them at home, if they miss a few classes or stop participating. Doing so gives me an opportunity to speak to them on a one-to-one basis. By doing this, students realise that you really do care about them!

I am really fortunate in that if any technical problems occur, I have some very good support. Usually problems are rectified within half an hour of notification.

A second key is the on-the-ground support, the aboriginal educational assistant and the mentor.

A good course induction is essential. I visited several of the schools at the end of last year to show staff and students what the course would entail. In addition, a teleconference was held at the beginning of the year, to walk students and mentors through all the processes involved in blended learning.

Finally, you need adequate funds. Teleconferencing is expensive, so are the mentors and assistants, and then there is the cost of my teaching hours. Trying to cut costs will, in my opinion, reduce retention rates and result in inferior outcomes. I strongly believe that if a pilot course such as this is a success and accommodates the needs of isolated students, there should be an exhaustive search for additional funding to keep it going.

Comments on my own learning...

In terms of my own development, I've learnt a lot over the years about teaching online. Actually, some of the most valuable lessons have come from poorly managed learning experiences. I have completed a Bachelor of Teaching, a Grad Dip in Retail and Wholesale, and am now undertaking a Masters in Marketing, all by distance. Like many of us who have studied using distance education, I've experienced many frustrations.

I also undertook the *FAMe* course last year. When I commenced *FAMe*, I was eager to learn—it seemed a timely opportunity to increase my knowledge of online development and delivery. However, in doing the course, I felt that there should have been more information about particular topics, and more structure.

Overall, most of my learning about online has come from practical experience, from trial and error. I'm continually involved in developing online materials and running courses like the one I've been describing. Our Institute strives for quality improvement, and encourages teachers like myself to develop and deliver better educational programs.

