

Exemplar 3

Course area: Assessment and Workplace Training

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This Exemplar illustrates the way that a single course can be delivered with different proportions of face-to-face and online.

I look after students enrolled in the Certificate in Assessment and Workplace Training through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). Before you can get into the course, there is a rigorous pre-assessment process. Students have to show that they have access to workplace training, which is necessary to complete the assessment requirements.

Once they've enrolled, we put students into groups of no more than 30 people. That is done to simulate a normal classroom. As far as possible, we want the group to operate as a learning community, so you need to limit group size.

Beginning participants are invited to come to a face-to-face orientation session with the rest of their group. This is not compulsory, but most do come. We give them an overview of the course, and outline what is involved in online learning. Then, we take them into the computer room for hands-on experience. Early on, we ask each student to post a profile of themselves onto the forum. Again, this is part of our effort to create some sense of community.

During the orientation, each group meets their facilitator, who is the main contact person. The roles of the facilitator include sending out regular emails, giving feedback to students who request it, and marking assignments.

There is a lot of flexibility in the way this course runs. Students can do all of the preparatory tasks in the module, some or none. The facilitator's role is to encourage interaction with other learners in the group and the learning material.

We encourage students to use the in-built forum to communicate with each other. They have the option of posting a question or comment to their own group or to everyone doing the course. It means they can raise an issue and throw it out for discussion beyond their own group.

We made a decision early on not to go with chat. Most of our students don't want to commit to a specific time slot, so asynchronous forums suit them better.

If students run into technical difficulties, there is a support facility on the site that they can use, although most technical problems are minimal—often things that are easy to solve, like ‘Acrobat Reader is not working properly’. But technical support is important, particularly given the very different levels of computer experience of our students. That shows up when we’ve done evaluations—we’d get comments like:

‘I found the technology a bit daunting. In fact, it really got in the way of my learning.’

What we’ve learnt from feedback like this is the need to make sure learners are OK with the actual navigation around the site. We also try to use computers as often as possible during face-to-face delivery—that way learners see them as being accessible, really no different from opening a book!

After they’ve done the preparatory work, students elect to be assessed. There are three assessment options for the practical components. They can be assessed in their own workplace by a qualified workplace assessor; they can make a video, to a specification we give them; or they can come to a practical session held at OTEN. We don’t encourage this last option. If we’ve selected our students properly, they should be able to satisfy options one or two.

The level of involvement in forums varies a lot. In each student group, there tends to be an active core of students who are continually posting and responding to comments. Really, this is no different to a traditional classroom, where some students are more active than others.

As I’ve been saying, for most students, the only face-to-face contact would be when they come to an initial orientation, and even this is not compulsory. However, recently I had an experience of a more equal blend of face-to-face and online.

For a commercial client, I delivered the Certificate face-to-face to some of their employees one day per week over 12 weeks. I had assembled a folder full of materials, adapted to the client’s needs and based around their units of competence. When I was teaching, I would always have my computer on so we could check on something from the online module.

Between classes, the employees doing the course were expected to keep working online. We set each learner up with an account, so that if they ran into difficulties, they could email me to get feedback or help. Overall, it was a nice mix. These students enjoyed the benefits of being in a class with other students, but they could also study online at their own pace.

Comments on my own learning...

I've done a few formal courses in online and distance education. Through University of Technology Sydney, I did an M Ed in Adult Education, with a major in flexible delivery. This was done as a distance student. I also did a course with Melbourne Institute of Technology dealing with facilitation of online learning. I got a lot out of this. Being an online learner helps you empathise with students and know their frustrations.

I've learnt a lot from the experience of running the Certificate. I know there are also professional development courses we could do, such as *FAMe*. However, we're so busy, we haven't really got time to participate at present.

