

Exemplar 5

Course area: Children's Services

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This Exemplar illustrates the value of flexibility and a 'can do' attitude in finding ways around problems.

A few years ago, I became aware that there are quite a few people who can't do Diploma-level study in child care because they don't have the Higher School Certificate. Even if you're mature-aged, you still need a Cert III to get into the Diploma. That's fine if you can study at TAFE full-time for six months! But there are a lot of people who can't manage full-time study, but want to do the Diploma. So we set about running a course in child care, at Cert III level, to cater to this group.

The students we were targeting may be at different stages. Some are school leavers who have dropped out in Year 9; some are mature-age and may be studying for the first time in decades.

However, they have a lot in common. They tend to have had little or no exposure to computers. Even the young ones may have left school without using computers.

We've also found that they have difficulty with 'academic speak'. You give them an assignment question, and they may have trouble understanding what you're after. They often don't know how to set out an assignment or how to manage study time. Overall, they're very high maintenance, and need a lot of jolly along, a lot of support and input.

Then there is the issue of self-esteem. They change a lot when they go through a Certificate III. When they finish, it's 'Wow, I've done this!!' They've blossomed. They can express themselves, they feel validated. But to get to that point, they need a lot of support, and you need to give them options. So we designed a course that would cater to their needs and, at the same time, give them the support they need.

We decided to give them written packages, developed by TAFE NSW. In addition, they get copies of the ANTA Toolboxes on CD. These link with the *Janison Toolbox*, so we can keep track of what students are doing. Some of them like the Toolboxes, others don't.

We've tried to create a supportive environment in a number of ways. We've only got a small core of teachers, which we've found works better. If you have too many teachers on a course like this, the students get confused, they don't know who is looking after what subject.

One catalyst for the course changes was \$3000 to field-trial the ANTA Toolbox in child care. Having received the funding, we were obliged to trial the materials, and that resulted in more planning and review. Every week, I'd meet with the other two staff to review the issues and lessons, including the material on the Toolbox.

We wanted the program to be flexible. However, we also recognised that if it was completely self-directed, it would not work. So we put a lot of thought into how to include face-to-face contact.

There were two main components. The first was a day-long Saturday workshop each month. Each of the teaching staff spent time presenting to the group at each workshop.

The second face-to-face component was what we promoted as a 'drop-in session', one evening each week. We ran this upstairs in our learning centre. The centre has computers, a telephone, TV and video, and work tables. On the night of the drop-in, we'd station one teacher upstairs in the learning centre, although she could always phone down for backup if she needed another teacher's help. Sometimes, things would get very busy upstairs, but more commonly, a group of perhaps five or six regular students would meet and work through the materials.

The other two teachers would be stationed downstairs, taking calls. We always log these calls, so we have a record of who is staying in touch and what is causing difficulties. Wednesday evening has always been the night students can get help by phone. Actually, it is best if, right at the beginning of the course, you let them know that '...if you're going to do this course, you need to be available on Wednesday nights.'

Comments on my own learning...

I've always been fairly computer-literate. Early on, I did a Certificate III in Information Technology, and I've done a number of short training courses—for example, a two-day instructional design course, and one on developing websites. I also did a course on *Janison Toolbox*, and I'm currently doing *Facilitating and Managing eLearning (FAME)*.

But a lot of what I know about online learning is self-taught. I was involved in some of the early child care learningware for TAFE NSW, as a content expert. Recently, I facilitated *Introduction to Teaching Online*.

I've learnt from all of these experiences. Looking back, a lot of our earlier approaches were too teacher-driven. I've learnt the importance of being activity and student-driven.

Another lesson I've learnt is that there are usually ways around problems if you're flexible. Our drop-in centre is an example, and it has been a big success. Another example is that we wanted our students to have a practical experience of conducting a play session. So during one of the weekend workshops, we arranged for parents to bring their young children, something that had not previously happened in our campus for flexible students. Even having students using things like email and fax to communicate with staff is fairly new.

I suppose the central theme in this is empowerment. We try to empower our students to express their needs, but staff like myself have also become more empowered, trying new things and finding new solutions.

