

Exemplar 6

Course area: Children's Services (Developing New Ways to Provide Service)

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This Exemplar illustrates approaches and issues relevant to learners who are not familiar with computers or learning online.

I teach a module online called ‘Developing New Ways to Provide Service’ in the Diploma in Community Services (Children’s Services) course. My students include both full-time and part-time students, doing the final stage of the course.

We decided that in the current semester, we’d introduce some online learning. We started with online slowly. After training for our staff, which I’ll talk about in a moment, the next step was to run one blended module per group. In my case, I delivered one module to two groups, and another teacher used a blended approach with one group.

Two of the groups were full-time day students, and one was a part-time evening group. The evening students tend to be older, and more anxious about computers. However, on the positive side, they’re also fairly self-directed, with experience of working through paper-based modules on their own.

Early on, we did something that worked very well. To try out online delivery, and to familiarise ourselves with using a TAFE NSW Online module on the *Janison* platform, we took three of our staff—two of our teachers who had never studied online and our line manager—and designated them a group of learners on the system. Another teacher and myself who had completed the *Introduction to Teaching Online* course acted as facilitators.

The way we ran it was fairly truncated, but it still gave us all the experience of sending and receiving email, having chats and forums. We gave the three ‘learners’ an outline of what they had to do, and over a period of about five weeks, we all had a rehearsal. It allowed me and the other facilitator to have a practice run at using the student management tools in *Janison*.

This initial trial gave us a good insight into what could come up, because most of our real students have had very little exposure to learning online. Even though we had done some introductory work on computers in semester 1, using material from the ANTA Toolbox and CD resources in the library, the way we delivered the module I’m describing here relied a lot more on computers.

At the time we started going online, some of the students had used the internet and email, but others had never used a computer. They freaked out at the mention of computers! However, after we discussed the idea with them, they were prepared to give it a go. But right from the start, there was a huge range in students' confidence levels.

I think we've done a good job of getting everyone working online. The face-to-face orientation sessions at the beginning were very worthwhile. Looking back, I probably should have given my groups more ongoing reinforcement of things like using forums, and more encouragement to learn collaboratively. That's something I've learnt this year—the value of providing follow-up support for individuals and groups as they work through the module.

Overall, though, it has been a very positive experience. From next semester, we plan to introduce online materials and approaches into a number of our modules. This decision partly reflects the enthusiasm of our students. They liked developing new skills in using computers and the internet, and most of them also liked the learning materials that were part of the online module.

From my point of view, I'm very pleased that the students have acquired much better research skills from doing the module. They know how to use the Library's online catalogue and access an online database.

The library staff have worked very closely with us. Once students had begun to develop confidence in working online, the library provided some sessions for them on advanced online research skills. This was particularly valuable for the evening students, who have very limited time to spend physically in the library.

Some of the students who seem most enthusiastic are those who started out knowing little or nothing. They tended to work hard until they had the necessary skills. One spent an incredible amount of time online in the first couple of weeks—sometimes 10 hours per week for a module I thought should require less than two hours per week—until she had the grasp of it.

She had to learn and practice even basic things like using the mouse. But she did get ahead and later, when her daughter's illness meant she had to miss a few weeks of class—was able to keep up. It's interesting, because in some subject areas like Accounting, you'd screen out students like these who start off completely unskilled with computers. In the beginning, I thought like that as well, but I'm really glad we didn't exclude anyone!

Given the type of students we have, a purely online course where everyone worked alone would not be suitable. Ours are very sociable learners, and a lot of the skills we're developing involve face-to-face role play and practice.

In the past, we have experimented with flexible learning, using written materials. Our idea at that time was to be completely self-paced. However, it led to high attrition. Now, we tend to keep groups together, rather than everyone going at their own pace.

The online module gave the students some flexibility about when and where they studied. I liked the way the *Janison* platform made students feel part of a group, and allowed them to get prompt feedback from their teacher.

Comments on my own learning...

I've gradually learnt more about teaching online, although there is still a lot I don't know. Two of us in the section were involved in a *LearnScope* project, which was very useful. Now there are four teachers in the section who have had some experience teaching online, they can help the other staff along.

I did the *Introduction to Teaching Online* course. I'd like to see every teacher who is interested undertake this course. It helps you understand what it means to teach online. Our staff development unit has also run some half-day sessions in teaching online and in using *Janison*. You learn how to track students, to manage them online. That's useful, although I've found that if you don't use it fairly quickly, you soon get rusty, so you need to be actually delivering online for the training to be useful. Next year I hope to do the *FAMe* course, and to learn more about developing online materials.

I took part in *NET*Working 2002*, but I felt a bit overwhelmed. To get really involved, you needed a lot of time—a big ask on top of everything else. I'm a reasonably regular participant in the *LearnScope* Virtual Learning Community. I enjoy exploring the VLC site (accessible via learnscope.anta.gov.au). It helps you build confidence, which you need to get value out of something like *NET*Working 2002*. On the VLC site, I've asked questions in the discussion forums, and got some useful replies. People are very helpful.

Another way you can learn is through piloting and evaluating what you are doing. We surveyed all our students at the beginning of the semester, and we'll do it again at the end. As well as being a faculty requirement to report on what we are achieving, this kind of evaluation helps me reflect on and improve what I'm doing.

We also encourage students to record their reflections on how things are going. All semester, we've had an online forum, where students go in and post comments about how they are finding learning online. This has produced a variety of feedback, including some negative comments. We have scope to reply to their comments, and they can also respond to each other. This kind of online commentary helps me stay in touch with how students are feeling.

