

## Exemplar 7

### Course area: Children's Services (Observing and Recording Observations)

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This Exemplar illustrates the challenges of finding a comfortable mix of maintaining control and letting students work independently at their own pace.

The subject I'm going to describe is called 'Observing and Recording Observations'. At the moment, for the first time, I'm teaching it in a blended way. It's a mix of face-to-face and online, and is part of the Diploma in Community Services (Children's Services).

I should tell you that most of my students are full-time. They're in their late teens to early 20's, with a number from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Last semester, I tried to get my students to start using the ANTA Toolbox Cert III material, but they were very 'anti'. I think one of the reasons was the way we introduced it. We only told them we'd be using computer-based learning part way through the semester. And, having said we'd use it, we didn't sell it very well.

So when we decided to make more use of online modules this semester, we tried to be much clearer, telling students about it upfront. The selling aspect is also very important. The things we emphasised were the opportunity to upskill, the need to know about computers for their future work and the fact that it would be fun!

Apart from our poor PR, there were other reasons why the ANTA toolbox was not well received initially. For one thing, at the time, we didn't have proper space with access to computers, something we've now arranged with the help of the library. You also need to appreciate the amount of time involved in getting students like ours comfortable with computers.

We've had a lot of help from our library to introduce more online material. They help students access the computers, and they manage the library computer area. In return, we try to keep them informed about what is happening. For example, we email a weekly newsletter to all students, which includes things like the tasks they have to complete and the deadlines. We've registered the library as a proxy student, so they get copies of this newsletter and other announcements. If they're better informed, it helps them guide students through things like library searches.

Some teachers put a lot of emphasis on profiling students to find out what skills and experience they have. But I don't think that is so important. I've tried to focus on where students want to get to, not where they are now. So I'd be asking: 'What are your goals? What do you want to achieve?'

One thing I've learnt is to try to keep close control of the pacing in the classroom. If a few of them know a lot, I'd rather they help the people who are slow rather than rushing too far ahead.

This semester, I've tended to do a lot of upfront work in the classroom. Looking back, I probably found it hard to give up that role. But I'm getting better! Next time, I would let go earlier. It is a difficult issue though. You realise that it is not just the student who has to let go of having someone in control, but the teacher as well.

When I'm using online modules with my group, I try to keep the things about computers fairly basic. With my students, it is best to leave out the technical jargon.

At one point, I found that I was getting a horrendous amount of emails, maybe 50 new ones in a day! I couldn't manage and keep the module going as well. Anyway, when I was taking part in *NET\*Working 2002*, I heard of a way of limiting emails<sup>8</sup>. What I did was divide the class into groups, and nominate a leader for each group. The leader was made responsible for collating information, and for directing composite answers and queries back to me. I also buddied people up, so they worked on tasks in pairs. These two changes provided a buffer. As soon as I made the changes, the number of emails dropped dramatically.

The actual pattern of classes I used varied. Even though I started off with a plan of how it would work, as things went on, I tended to play it by ear. In the early part of the module, we had classes every week, and that continued for a while.

Then there was a period when I was having one week on, one week off. In the 'off' week, most people would study in the library. They could, of course, study from home, but most of these people like to work together. That is just the nature of child care students. If you go to the library, you'll see them all over there, chatting and helping each other. Another advantage of working on campus is that I was always around and available if they needed help.

With the child care courses, we're gradually working towards a pathway, in which online learning becomes more and more part of the mix. So early on, you have a taster, you let people experience a few online tasks or a self-paced module. Next semester. You start using more blended learning. And as you progress, students start doing a lot of their work online.

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8 The suggestions was made by one of the featured speakers in *NET\*Working 2002*, Curtis Bonk.

But I don't think the whole course ever should or could be completely online. Not every scenario can be covered online. You're always going to need some face-to-face. Remember also that a lot of our assessment happens face-to-face, either in a simulated environment or during work placements.

There is no doubt that online has a lot of applications. Take one of my students who, for family reasons, went back home to Malta during term. With the internet, she was able to keep up with things, to stay in touch.

### Comments on my own learning...

I've gradually learnt about teaching online, both through my experience and through doing some courses. I've done *Introduction to Teaching Online*, and I've been part of a *LearnScope* project.

I've also had some training on the ANTA Toolboxes and on *Janison*. As part of the *LearnScope* project, a few of us went to Coffs Harbour where *Janison* was developed, and got some coaching into how it works.

As well as all this, I have also participated in things like *NET\*Working 2002*. I found that a bit overwhelming—there was too much information, too much happening.

The main problem with online teaching at the moment is the lack of support. That applies at every level—lack of resources, not enough teaching areas that have computers, and not enough time to give students the attention they need, particularly those who have never used computers.

