

Exemplar 8

Course area: Computer Applications (Proofreading for Office Technology)

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This Exemplar illustrates careful phasing in of online learning, in a way that builds learner confidence.



I'm using a blended approach with a module that I teach called 'Proofreading for Office Technology', which forms part of the Certificate II in Computer Applications for the Office.

Students in this course tend to be returning to the workforce, often after a fairly long period as mothers. As a group, they often lack confidence, and need a lot of support.

I had a few reasons for delivering this module online. One was that the online materials were already there, so they didn't need to go to the expense of buying another textbook. My college is in a low socio-economic area, and we find that the cost of texts can be a real hurdle which can deter people from studying.

Another reason for online delivery was that it provides a good opportunity for students to experience the approach. They've probably seen their kids downloading music CDs or looking up homework information, but they learn another facet of what the internet can be used for. They're studying computer applications, so that is particularly relevant.

Only about half the group would have access to computers at home. The rest would come in and use them in the library. Our library is unique, in that there are quite a number of computers, and you can book them in one-hour timeslots.

Online activities are completed in one of two ways. Students can do them directly online, typing their answers into the space provided in the materials. Alternatively, if they run out of time, they can cut and paste the material into a Word document, which they can print out and answer. They don't have to go back into *Janison* to complete the task—I accept answers typed out in Word.

The online module is only introduced after they've been in the course for a few weeks, and are over their anxiety about using the keyboard and logging on. During this initial period, we also help them to set up an email account and learn to use it.

To introduce the module, I take the students all together into the online site, and we look at the first three modules all together. Doing it like this takes the stress out of feelings like 'where am I up to' and 'how do I do this?'. I tried to make sure that when they leave the classroom, they have the confidence to go on.

While they are working on the module, I typically allocate two hours per day of in-class time to it. They generally work at the computer alone. If they run into difficulties, they don't have to email the facilitator—I am there in the classroom to help them.

This kind of personal interface is important to students like this. They're not IT students, not familiar with computers and email in the way their kids might be. They can get very anxious about being wrong, or about having to wait too long for an answer. Perhaps they can't remember how to get into a particular exercise. Or perhaps they forget how to scroll down the page, and get confused about what the next step is. If they had to do the module at home, I could see some of these students in tears, not knowing what to do!

Only recently, I discussed with my students their feelings about learning using computers. They all enjoyed the experience, but most said that they wouldn't like to study purely online, mainly because they didn't have enough expertise with computers.

To me, the module is a teaching tool, but I've used it within the framework of a structured classroom. I keep control on the pacing, at least for the first few tasks. I say, 'By this date, you have to be up to this point'. They can go to the library, work at home, or sit in on one of my other classes if there are computers available.

Sometimes, the server is down, and it can put your whole plan out. I always try to have a back-up: 'If the Internet is down today, I will do X'.

Comments on my own learning...

I did *Introduction to Teaching Online*, and got a small release from teaching to do it. The course gave me a feeling for what it is like to email your facilitator, to keep in touch online. It makes you more aware of what it is like for students.

My Head Teacher is a facilitator for online learning within the Institute, and is skilled in the area. She's helped me resolve a number of problems. My colleagues have also helped.

An area of staff development where I think there could be improvement is within the modules themselves. I feel I need much clearer guidance about each unit and how it is meant to work. There should be better help mechanisms on screen for assistance, or perhaps a facilitator's help menu.

