

## Exemplar 9

### Course area: Co-ordination of Teachers and Courses

Vivian Evans

vivevans@hwy.com.au

Coonabarabran



This Exemplar illustrates some of the platforms that are available to support learner groups.

I'm not a face-to-face teacher at the moment, but I am involved in adult education through my role as Cluster Consultant. I work with five different ACE colleges, spread across the Inner West of NSW. Before doing that, I was a Regional Language and Literacy coordinator.

In the adult and community sector, there are varying stages of development with online learning. At this stage, many people are not quite ready, or perhaps willing, to use the internet in their teaching. I personally have taken a real interest in the possibilities of online learning in the ACE sector, and hope to encourage others to explore it and develop the necessary skills.

My own circumstances come into it. I'm the mother of two young children. I live in a log cabin out in the bush outside Coonabarabran. Here, we rely on solar power. With online, I can work and learn from home. It's fantastic! For me and people like me, online learning has a lot of potential. But at the moment, there are not enough opportunities to learn in this mode.

A lot of my exposure to online approaches has come from my recent involvement in *LearnScope* projects as a learning participant, mentor and then project facilitator and manager.

In my present role, I need to stay in touch with a lot of people, and I've been using a site called Community Zero [communityzero.com]. They charge a nominal amount per group. On this site, you can have chat sessions, you can have discussion threads, you can poll (that is, create a question and find out what others think), upload documents and photos. Actually, being able to send other group members photos adds a good dimension, it helps to personalise things. I have recently learnt about the concept of a 'community of practice', and that's definitely what I am interested in supporting. My community enables teachers and coordinators in like fields to connect and collaborate.

Before Community Zero, I also used an American platform for a while, Blackboard [www.blackboard.com]. It was designed to support teaching in schools and universities. Blackboard was free initially, but then they introduced fees and I, along with colleagues, started to look for alternative platforms.

Blackboard has got some good features, though. It supports synchronous chat and discussion threads in a way that is very clear. Site administration is another strength. You can control who has access to your site. You can also look back at what happened previously by clicking on a past date to see what was discussed.

In terms of blending online with other approaches, the strength of platforms like Community Zero and Blackboard is the flexibility they provide. In ACE classes, you can connect with each other, you can get feedback and engage in dialogue. And what's more, you can do it when you like, day or night.

Of course, you can have some kind of dialogue with class-members simply by using email. But I think Community Zero and Blackboard are much better than using email. I've tried, and found that once an email dialogue gets going, it can overload the email system. Also, emails can bounce, and you quickly end up with an out-of-sync mess. Whereas with a threaded discussion, you can clearly see the sequence.

One thing teachers using online discussions need to realise is how important the role of the facilitator is. You can't just set it up and leave it for a week or two. Regular checking and participation is essential. The technology helps. For example, with Community Zero, you can specify how often you want the site to get in touch with you. I've arranged to get a weekly update. They send you an email to indicate any new contributions, and they even send you a summary of what's been said. A very useful feature.

It's puzzling why teachers in the ACE sector have been so slow to go online. I think a lot of teachers are fearful of it, because it adds yet another dimension and set of demands. Certainly, the experience of other educational sectors is that there can be costs and difficulties, but I think that these can, to a great extent, be avoided with the new, and ever-improving, platforms that are available.

ACE teachers often think that going online will take too much time. The best way you can deal with such fears is to learn about online learning yourself as a student. Take up any opportunity to join a *LearnScope* project—that way, you experience what it is like, you see the difficulties, but also the advantages.

When you're running an online discussion, I find it works best if you do it with someone else, and team-teach. Especially in the initial stages of introducing chat to new users. Some students may be having difficulty logging in or participating, and one teacher can deal with them while the other teacher gets on with facilitating the discussion.

---

When Vivian stopped using the site, the fee was around \$700 for a license to conduct your group. For current fees, see blackboard.com

Apart from Community Zero and Blackboard, I've tried using a few other sites as well. Each one has its advantages and disadvantages. There is Grassroots Moo [[www.enabling.org/grassroots/](http://www.enabling.org/grassroots/)], but to use it, you need to upload a lot of material. That can present problems for someone working from home with only modem access. Grassroots Moo is very text based, and can put off some people. Other people love it though, which just illustrates that different people learn in different ways!

I've also tried the chat facility on [groups.msn.com](http://groups.msn.com), but there have been issues with limits on the number of participants. On one occasion, the facilitator was also blocked from participating in a discussion, leaving students wondering where they were! Msn Messenger [[at ninemsn.com.au](http://ninemsn.com.au)] is useful for connecting briefly with others online.

Some of the people I've been networking with have tried to do it from a TAFE computer system, but that can present problems, too. There are strong firewalls, so you may not be able to upload the chat. It also means that the teacher operating in a TAFE setting can't always see what the student sees.

And then, of course, there is the issue of people who only have one home phone line. Once they're logged on to the computer, they can't phone to seek assistance, because the phone line is being used by the computer.

Most of the online learning I've seen has been with middle-aged women. Some of them have quite a computer-phobia. I don't think pure online is appropriate. But a blended approach, particularly with some initial face-to-face contact where you show them how it works, is much better.

Many of the learners I come across are not very confident generally, let alone with computers. I think that online learning alone would be too much. To build confidence, you need to combine online with face-to-face.

## Comments on my own learning...

In my previous role co-ordinating language and literacy, I've been involved in four *LearnScope* projects. We started with the basics, like principles of online learning. The focus of one of the projects was to link teachers in different locations. These projects are a good way to learn. In one case, I had a support person who was very IT savvy, and we learnt a lot from each other.

You also learn a lot from participants' difficulties. Sometimes, people who are new to computers get stuck on the most simple things. I had one person who couldn't get the internet to work. When I went to her place, she was putting the web address in the wrong place, and getting very frustrated! Just by being able to see what she was looking at we were able to solve the situation in an instant.

I'm chair of the board of a newly formed organisation called Networking Women's Learning Incorporated. It has stemmed from a project to help women learn and connect online. In the initial project, we had some face-to-face sessions and follow-up video conferences. Fascinating! I participated using the facilities at our local Community Technology Centre. Videoconferencing has a lot of possibilities in the ACE sector, especially as the technology improves and the prices drop.

In terms of my own further development, the way I like to learn is via a mix of online communication—both synchronous and asynchronous. You need the 'people factor' to feel a part of the learning process. There needs to be some purpose in participating, some driving force. For the teachers and coordinators I work with, there needs to be a need to connect and collaborate—it might be something like 'task validation and moderation', or the sharing of knowledge or tasks, which provides teachers with the 'driver'.

