Blended Learning

LEARNING NEW SKILLS IN BLENDING
Acknowledgements

The material in this booklet draws heavily on interviews with educators (mainly teachers in vocational, adult and community education) during 2002. Their generous assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

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ISBN 1 877057 23 1
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Preface

This booklet resulted from an ANTA-funded project which set out to investigate blended learning—that is, learning which combines online and face-to-face approaches—in accredited technical, adult and community education in NSW. The main source of data was a series of interviews with teachers.

Interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their blending practices, and on what they’d learnt along the way. In every case, the teachers quoted are out there doing it, exploring how they can take advantage of the possibilities of computers and the internet.

The full set of materials comprises:

Booklet 1  Learning new skills in blending (this booklet): Ways of developing your skills in blending.

Booklet 2  Lessons from experience: Suggestions for dealing with the challenges you’ll face when you combine online and face-to-face approaches.

Booklet 3  The Exemplars: Accounts of blended learning in 22 technical, adult and community education course areas.

Booklet 4  Glossary of terms and courses.

The interviews highlighted the importance of professional development in supporting your blending efforts. In this booklet, details are provided not only of planned professional development activities that interviewees found useful, but also of the kinds of learning processes that occurred.
Combining online and face-to-face

Teachers start to combine online and face-to-face approaches for many reasons.

Perhaps you’ve been asked to deliver an online course. Or maybe you’ve heard what others are doing online. Or perhaps you’ve worked with someone who has skills in online learning, like Carole Camp in Exemplar 4:

‘I’m keen to learn how to design web pages. When I was developing the nursing course, I had a designer do the actual design—but it would help if I could do some of that myself.’

Your motivation may be to encourage your face-to-face students to use the internet for research, or retrieve resources from a CD, or use online materials such as ANTA Toolboxes or TAFE NSW learningware. Perhaps you’ve heard about the possibilities of communication tools such as email, online chat and forums.

Whatever your starting point, going online will introduce new challenges and new things to learn. As one teacher commented:

‘When you first run a course online, you can feel a bit at sea. It is certainly not the same as teaching in the classroom, where you can tell from someone’s body language that they’re struggling. When you’re online, it can feel more disjointed.’

In learning about the options that are available, in developing your skills in combining online learning with face-to-face, and in dealing with the inevitable feelings of being ‘a bit at sea’, one thing is very clear—professional development plays a key role.

You may be enthusiastic about trying out new approaches, and may be very interested, but unless you also begin to develop the necessary skills, your achievements will be limited:

‘It’s essential to do some training in the online platform. If the teacher is not confident, online doesn’t work. It just leads to a lot of frustration.’

‘We were all interested in the possibilities of online, but none of the facilitators had any first-hand experience in running an online course. Having gone through it once, the first thing we’ll do differently before we run it again, is make sure our teaching staff have solid, first-hand experience as online facilitators.’

Let’s look at some of the ways you can develop skills in combining online with face-to-face and, in the process, build up the necessary ‘first-hand experience’.
1. Structured Courses and Events

Most of the teachers who were interviewed in this project had participated in a range of structured courses and events. A message that comes through the Exemplars, over and over again, is that the best way of learning to facilitate online learning is to experience being an online learner yourself:

‘One thing [facilitating online learning] has reinforced for me is that you need to actually experience online learning to appreciate how it works. Actually doing it opens your eyes’.

‘Studying online is something I would strongly recommend to anyone wanting to develop a better understanding of online learning. In particular, those who will be teaching or facilitating courses online will find Introduction to Teaching Online, or a similar e-moderation course, invaluable.’

‘Being an online learner yourself helps you empathise with students and know their frustrations.’

The most frequently cited courses, Introduction to Teaching Online, and Facilitating and Managing eLearning, do involve direct experience of online learning:

- **Introduction to Teaching Online** (or ‘ItTO’).
  This professional development course is designed to expose teachers to a range of online strategies, issues and networks. Many of the teachers reported in the Exemplars had done this course, and recommended it as a way of developing basic skills:

  ‘I’d like to see every teacher who is interested undertake Introduction to Teaching Online. It helps you understand what it means to teach online.’

  ‘Introduction to Teaching Online 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’.

- **Facilitating and Managing eLearning** (or ‘FAME’).
  FAME is a Graduate Certificate in online teaching, run by Professional Development Network for TAFE NSW teachers. This course is conducted online and is activity-driven, rather than being driven by content or technology.
Reading through the Exemplars, you’ll find lots of enthusiasm for FAME:

‘Even though I’d dabbled with computers for years, FAME has really helped me get the knowledge I needed to teach online.’

‘FAME has opened my eyes to lots of ways we can streamline what we do here. I’m definitely going to change a few things next year.’

In addition to ItTO and FAME, the Exemplars refer to a range of other courses and structured events which contributed to learning about online facilitation. These include:

■ the Masters Degree in Open and Distance Learning (University of Southern Queensland)
■ the Masters Degree in Education (Adult) at University of Technology Sydney, which can be done by distance mode
■ Online ACE, a course run during 2001 and 2002 for ACE teachers
■ courses in facilitating online learning available at a distance through Riverina Institute, TAFE NSW and Melbourne Institute of Technology
■ various short courses in areas such as instructional design and website design
■ online learning events such as the NET*Working 2002

2 LearnScope projects

Many of the Exemplars comment on the professional development benefits of participating in a LearnScope project. LearnScope is a national work-based learning initiative funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) as part of their Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2002–2004. The focus is on people within the VET sector who need to develop new skills in applying learning technologies to flexible learning and delivery.

LearnScope funding is available through a competitive application process at the beginning of each year. Many of the Exemplars refer directly to the benefits of LearnScope:

‘LearnScope gave me the opportunity to think how else to meet students’ needs. The LearnScope projects have helped me become more familiar with e-learning. I have learnt about how sites are constructed, and about chats and forums.’

‘I’d always suggest to another teacher that the best way to learn about online learning is to experience it yourself. That is where LearnScope projects and courses are great. They give you a good idea of what it feels like, and how much fun it can be.’
A number of the teachers interviewed for Exemplars had continued their involvement in LearnScope projects as facilitators:

‘I’ve been involved in four LearnScope projects. Most recently, I’ve been a paid LearnScope facilitator. The 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.’

LearnScope projects are a good way to develop new skills, but they can also be an effective catalyst for change:

‘You can use something like a LearnScope project as a driver of change. The project gives you the excuse, so you can say ‘we’ve got to have X completed, because it is a condition of our funding’. The culture here is very difficult to change, and the LearnScope project helped a lot.’

3 The Virtual Learning Community

As well as participating in LearnScope projects, a number of the Exemplars comment on the value of participating in the Virtual Learning Community (‘VLC’) [see learnscope.anta.gov.au].

The VLC is an online professional development space designed for VET practitioners who are interested in exploring the applications of technology to teaching and learning. The site provides a range of professional development options, including resources, e-learning activities and a space for community interaction:

‘I’m a reasonably regular participant in the Virtual Learning Community. I enjoy exploring the site. It helps you build confidence. On the site, I’ve asked questions in the discussion forums, and got some useful replies. People are very helpful.’
4 Learning Processes

As well as participating in the kinds of courses and learning experiences that we’ve been considering, there are a range of other ways that you can increase your skills and knowledge in teaching online. Let’s look at some of these.

Learning through involvement in developing online materials

Some teachers got started with online learning as subject experts developing online materials. For example:

‘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.’

As well as learning from other teachers involved in a project like this, a great deal of learning results from involvement with technical experts in online learning:

‘For me, it’s been a steep learning curve. The people from [the Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning, TAFE NSW—Sydney Institute] have been a huge help, sharing their skills, working together and full of encouragement. I’ve learnt a lot from them about the technical side of this project.’

Learning from negative experiences

A number of Exemplars comment on the value of courses which teachers found frustrating and didn’t like.

‘Some of my most valuable lessons have come from poorly managed learning experiences. I have completed [undergraduate and postgraduate courses], all by distance. Like many of us who have studied using distance education, I have experienced many frustrations [which] have resulted in a much more empathetic attitude towards my students.’

‘I’ve learnt from negative experiences. I did a distance course some years back. The people conducting the course lost my assignments, they were very slow providing feedback. From that, I learnt the value of being organised, and of quick feedback.’

‘Some online materials that I’ve seen used in university courses have too much theory, and they’re dry. There is a tendency to just dump the content onto the screen. So, with the course [I ran], I was keen to get people to work with the information, to do exercises and reflect on what they’d learnt.’
Even when reactions to a professional development experience are mixed rather than simply negative, valuable learning can result:

‘Three colleagues and I did *Teaching and Learning Online* [run by TAFE NSW—Riverina Institute], and each of us had completely different reactions to it. These ranged from one colleague with little computer experience who found it ‘dreadful’, to another colleague who found it ‘wonderful’. It highlighted that different people experience things differently. The result was that we were determined to build plenty of flexibility into [our own online course].’

This is an important point for your own professional development. Don’t assume you’ll learn best from programs that are perfectly run, enjoyable, and highly organised. Learning occurs from a great variety of sources including, in some cases, badly-managed learning experiences.

**Learning through reflecting on your experience**

Whenever you and your colleagues are trying out a new teaching approach, it is a good idea to build in opportunities for everyone involved to come together and reflect on their experiences:

‘Afterwards, the staff involved all met and reflected on what had been learnt, and on how we could build on this experience.’

‘We surveyed all our students at the beginning of the semester, and we’ll do it again at the end. This kind of evaluation helps me reflect and improve what I’m doing.’

The keys to this kind of learning are to:

- ask a lot of open-ended questions, such as ‘What have we learnt’, and ‘How could we overcome that next time’

- model behaviours that support open reflection—for example, avoid sarcasm, try not to be defensive, try to include everyone and encourage them to share their views

- set some ground-rules for review meetings, to make sure they’re not about blaming individuals for problems but, instead focus on improving things for next time

- try to promote the idea of ‘continuous improvement’ so that, no matter how well something runs, you have a reason for reviewing and thinking creatively:

‘I’ve also learnt a lot from the experience of managing the programming and software development subjects. Each time we’ve offered them online, we try to improve on what we did the previous year.’
Learning by participating in courses as a pseudo-student

The value of experiencing online learning first-hand has already been mentioned. One method employed by some of the teachers interviewed was to enrol in a course that they were about to teach:

‘To try out online delivery and to familiarise ourselves with using the Janison platform, we took three of our staff and designated them a group of learners on the system. Another teacher and I 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.’

Learning from random incidents

Some of the Exemplars report learning that results from unplanned incidents or situations. For example:

‘After being involved in administering an external exam for translators, some candidates commented on how difficult it was to sit a test in interpreting when one only hears the speech, without also seeing the body-language. I started to think about how could we make the practice of interpreting more real by showing body-language. Videos are clumsy, and CDs seemed the way to go.’

This line of thinking led on to the very effective online resource for interpreters described in Exemplar 20.

Learning from someone who has ‘been there before’

While the professional development initiatives we’ve been looking at are great up to a point, there’s also real value in having someone who is familiar with the practical aspects of course management show you the ropes. Some of the Exemplars highlight the importance of learning about such everyday issues as teaching loads and class sizes, record-keeping, and assessment:

‘Even though courses like Introduction to Teaching Online are worthwhile, you still need to be taught how to run your particular course by someone more experienced. They’re the only ones who can tell you about basic things like how to keep records and how many students can you manage.’
Michael Gwyther, who has been very involved in professional development in the ACE sector, has argued strongly for more attention to course management and administration:

‘To run a successful course, a teacher needs the experience of being an online learner, but that alone is not sufficient. You also need a whole range of skills in areas like online course development, marketing, tracking, accountability and delivery. Just experiencing online learning won’t tell you how to build a community online and manage collaborative learning exercises. You need to actually do things like that, with guidance and support from someone more experienced.’

**Learning by sharing information about successes and failures**

In any new initiative, the way you handle information will make a big difference to how much learning occurs. Obviously, open information sharing, including acknowledgement of challenges and difficulties, is a far more fruitful basis for learning than information hoarding. Exemplar 16 illustrates the value of open exchange, by describing the process used in TAFE when online modules were first being developed:

‘One of the main sources of our learning was what they called a ‘showcase server’. Any development team could have a look at other modules online, to see how they were progressing. It meant you could go and say: “I like this, but I don’t think that will work” It was great!’