Blended Learning

3

THE EXEMPLARS
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 21 5
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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*: 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* (this booklet): Accounts of blended learning in 22 TAFE, adult and community education course areas.

Booklet 4  
*Glossary of terms and courses*.

The Exemplars contained in this booklet describe, in interviewees’ own words, how they combined online and face-to-face approaches, what they learnt along the way, and how they developed the necessary skills and knowledge.

In selecting interviewees for this project, it’s important to emphasise that no attempt was made to focus on ‘best practice’, nor to single out teachers well known for their online expertise. Instead, the aim was to cover a range of practices and experience levels.

While some interviewees described very sophisticated approaches, others talked about courses where they’d only introduced one online component. In a number of the Exemplars, one can see plenty of scope for improvement. It’s hoped that this range will give teachers interested in online learning plenty to think about.

The tone of all of the Exemplars is very positive. Nevertheless, one outcome of reporting people’s comments in detail is that there will inevitably be criticisms mixed in with the ideas and enthusiasm. Bear in mind that the project was not, in any sense, a balanced evaluation. Given that, try to take criticisms for what they are—the perceptions of one or two individuals, which may or may not represent the views and experiences of others.
We have been running a mandatory 10-hour module in Occupational Health and Safety, one of a suite of Accounting modules. Up until this year, the course had been only available face-to-face. Because it only ran for 10 hours, it was causing us some difficulties. It was always hard to timetable, particularly for evening students. We have traditionally run it one night per week over three weeks. It meant that it was difficult to let students know when to turn up and, when they’d finished it, they had nothing else to do for the rest of term. They couldn’t pick up another subject.

Because of the problems we were having in offering this module, we decided to offer it to our evening students online. It was an opportunity to see how our students would cope. We figured they would have the computer skills and the necessary commitment to do it. Running it online also gave us a chance to try out online. We would get to see what the advantages and disadvantages were, and what we should do differently next time.

We started with an existing online module, developed as part of TAFE NSW learningware for Administrative Services. We worked through the module online, and saw that it had a lot of benefits. This semester, we’ve offered it to our evening students.

We started out with an information night. It lasted about an hour, during which students received a tailor-made guide covering how to study online and what was required.

About 40 students came to the information session, and around two-thirds of them finished. Of the rest, some never logged on, or logged on but found the going difficult, like the student who commented:

‘Sometimes I wondered if I was doing well, feeling like I was looking at the wall that answers nothing.’

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5 To make the account easier to follow, the term ‘we’ is used throughout the account. Both interviewees contributed to the discussion, Suellen from the perspective of Head Teacher, and Druanne from the perspective of the teacher who actually facilitated the module.
But most of the students who finished were very positive. They liked the module’s flexibility, and found it interesting. Their reactions included comments such as:

‘I’d be happy to do any of my subjects online, as long as there was a teacher we could see if we were having difficulties understanding.’

‘It was good that you could study it at your own pace and at times that suit you.’

‘The thing I liked was the time factor, and I could always pick up where I left off.’

We’ve certainly learnt some lessons in the process. One of our difficulties was that we failed to let our evening students know when they enrolled that the module would only be available online and that there would be an optional information session. The result was that a lot of people probably didn’t hear about the information session. Next semester, we will let everyone know up front, and we’ll make the information session compulsory.

All of these students have to do Business Computing, so they should have the basic computer skills necessary to access and use the module. What we’re looking at now is whether to incorporate the Occupational Health and Safety module into Business Computing, or to require them to do Business Computing before they do the module.

Right through the module, we attempted to keep in touch with the students. For example, we sent out emails asking them how they were going. We got quite a few emails back, and were able to help them with a number of issues.

We used the Janison platform to track students. One mistake we made was to divide the students up into two groups on Janison. This was a manoeuvre to fit within TAFE class-size and teaching hours rules, but it created some difficulties. You had to keep switching between the two groups to have a look at everyone. In future, we’ll have just the one large group for each facilitator.

There was an optional chat session held one evening each week, but it didn’t get a great response. Next time, we’ll handle that differently. One session every two or three weeks is enough, but beforehand, we’ll sent out an emailed announcement. In other words, chats will be less frequent but better promoted. The teacher can use the extra time responding to emails.

The busiest time for emails was close to the final date for assessments. Emails were flying back and forth! With Janison, students have to indicate that they’ve completed the module before we can send out the assessment tasks. This requirement was in their guidebook, but lots of them didn’t do it. It meant we had to chase them up by email. Next time, we’ll use a check-sheet on the front of their guide, and use bold print, to emphasise things like this they have to do.
One concern about the module is the amount of time required. Even though this was only a 10 hour module, it took a lot of time to run, partly because it was new for us. I [Druann] was finding that I was doing something every day. It took a lot of time to respond to all the emails. Even at home at the weekend, I’d go in and check their emails so they weren’t left hanging with a query that I could answer. But it all takes time!

Partly, this problem comes from not managing expectations. Next time, we’d make it clearer that responses to emails won’t be instant. Students should expect turn-around time for emails to be a few days. They should be told to expect delays.

Next time we run it, it might be worth getting everyone to be assessed together on campus. As it is, with students submitting assessments from home, you could question validity. If someone knows someone else, it’s too easy to share answers around. In areas where there are licensing requirements, you need to be completely confident that the student submitting the work is the one who did it.

Comments on our own learning...

I [Druann] did the Introduction to Teaching Online. It consists of a day-long workshop along with seven weeks of online learning at home. I’ve just finished that, and found it very interesting.

We have also learnt from the Institute’s online facilitator. He’s been great. He’s given us one-to-one coaching, shown us examples, and provided a lot of time to help us develop the materials. He got us online and has us putting the material on Janison for us. He also encouraged us to play. For example, we took part in a chat session, just playing around and exploring.

Having someone like that was really helpful. It meant that if you got stuck, you could call him and get instant help. For anyone thinking of going online, you need that kind of back-up. But of course, with budget limits, I’m aware that that isn’t always possible.

One thing about online teaching we’re really excited about is that you’re not restricted to local teachers. One of the teachers who taught one of our modules is based in Victoria. Delivering online means you can get the best people from the industry, and you’re not restricted—they don’t have to come to your Institute to deliver.

Overall, online teaching gives you a lot of flexibility. You’re not limited to nine to five. You can log on any time, day or night.
We\textsuperscript{6} work in the staff development area in TAFE. We’re currently offering the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training via blended delivery to TAFE staff. Most of our ‘students’ are part-time TAFE teachers. They come from a very wide geographical spread, from Lithgow to Broken Hill. Some of them may have travelled for half a day or more to get to a workshop session.

Up until this semester, we’ve been using a normal face-to-face approach. The material was delivered over six day-long workshops, held on Saturdays. They can get quite frustrated about having to give up so much of their own time. We wanted to try a different approach that cut down on face-to-face time, and added more flexibility for the learners. We wanted teachers to experience online learning as well. This semester, we decided to try a blended approach as a comparison. It is mainly delivered online, with only three workshops. Straight away, you’ve halved the amount of face-to-face time. We wanted to see how the learners liked it, and how cost-effective it was.

We started the course off with a day-long, face-to-face workshop, which gave an orientation to the course and to course requirements. We got them to introduce themselves to other learners, we talked about the course requirements, we looked at the course itself and the Janison Toolbox that it sits in, and we went through the learning resources that are available. Most of the first workshop was spent with them on the computer, learning how to navigate around the course, and use the communication tools.

The modules in Assessment and Workplace Training fall into three distinct areas. The first is about the delivery of content to students. The second area, which is where we’re up to now, deals with assessment. Then the third will deal with planning and promoting training programs.

Each of these areas is covered in a workshop. After each workshop, we try to send them away with a clear idea of what they have to do to demonstrate competence in each area.

\textsuperscript{6} To make the account easier to follow, the term ‘we’ is used throughout the account. Both interviewees contributed to the discussion. Merelyn taught the first part of the course, covering Teaching and Learning. Alan was teaching the second part, dealing with Assessment. They were jointly involved in managing the overall program.
The workshops are a few months apart. They are meant to provide a trigger, so before students turn up next time, they know how much work they have to complete. The workshops are then used mostly for reinforcement, and to present new information.

The online material we’re using is full of content, with over 200 learning activities. Early on, we got a good tip—don’t try to check learner input for all activities. In fact, we settled on two activities for each module that we check and provide feedback on. Students do the rest of the activities for their own benefit. If we tried to trawl through the site to look at everything students had done, we could spend our life going round and round, seeing who had answered what!

Right now, we are halfway through the course. The students like a lot of things about the course. They like the swiftness of our responses, our accessibility. But, boy, you almost need to be available 24 hours, seven days a week to satisfy their expectations. Because we’re new to this, we’ve tried hard to be responsive. In fact, we’ve set the goal of a 24-hour response time to emails. But that’s difficult to achieve. I’m worried about how sustainable it is. You can see how you get facilitator burnout!

At the second workshop, they told us they wanted more interaction between workshop sessions. So we set up chat sessions, and we’ve run forums. But the course doesn’t easily accommodate them, and they haven’t been particularly successful. Anything like a chat is an add-on.

The online materials we’re using assume that students will work alone. They go away, read the notes, and answer the questions online. No group contact is built in between workshops. The materials are an early example of TAFE NSW learningware, and are overdue for reform. There needs to be a lot more learner interactivity.

In contrast with the face-to-face course, the online version is causing us some anxieties, particularly now they’re doing the assessment modules. This material is complex and, when you’re delivering it face-to-face, normally results in huge numbers of questions.

But in the online version, it feels like a big void. Right now [mid-way through assessment], it is not clear how they’re progressing. For example, we just came across a student yesterday who hadn’t even started, because he didn’t know what to do. We’ve only heard from three students, but the rest are a worry.

When they first started off on the course, they were very involved in the activities. Because remember, we’re not looking at their work, and so we’re not getting a feel for where students are up to. There could be any number of reasons why they’re not as active now as they started off. We don’t know. You have to put up with the anxiety.
There are hundreds of pages of notes in this course. One suggestion someone gave us was to hand out copies of the materials to everyone at the beginning. That way, learners don’t have to print off everything from their college or home. We handed out the notes at their first workshop, along with a learner kit for the course.

Before we finish, some general comments. The level of uptake of the internet out west is low and the infrastructure to support it is not there in country areas. Pure online probably won’t be very strong for us, particularly outside the large rural towns. It raises a lot of questions. For us, it may be best to use the online resources in a blended delivery model, rather than trying to go fully online.

Comments on our own learning...

I [Alan] am doing *Introduction to Teaching Online* concurrently with delivering this course. I’m continually switching between being a learner myself, and delivering the course to others.

One major conclusion I’ve come to is that the Cert IV, with its heavy focus on content, is not the best method to use. I prefer the approach they take in *Introduction to Teaching Online*. It is much more guidance-driven than content-driven.

In my case [Merelyn], I’ve facilitated various teams through five years of LearnScope projects. In the process, I’ve learnt a lot from participants. But until this year, I have not been in the role of online teacher.

I have also facilitated *Introduction to Teaching Online*, and I’m currently participating in the *Facilitating and Managing elearning (FAME)* course. One of FAME’s requirements is that you have to deliver online. The approach we’ve been describing originally came up in that context.

But there are a few problems with the training that is available. Firstly, the facilitation style emphasised in courses like FAME and *Introduction to Teaching Online* does not match the style of a lot of online courses. That has been a big issue for us with the Cert IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. To teach online through TAFE Connect, you need three levels of training. You need course-specific training, as we did by being trained in the Cert IV materials. You also need training in Janison Toolbox, so you know how to work the platform. You can enroll in an online course on Janison7. And finally, you need to have completed *Introduction to Teaching Online*, which helps with training facilitation.

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7 The TAFE NSW online platform, which is conducted through TAFE NSW Professional Development Network.
I look after students enrolled in the Certificate in Assessment and Workplace Training through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). Before you can get into the course, there is a rigorous pre-assessment process. Students have to show that they have access to workplace training, which is necessary to complete the assessment requirements.

Once they’ve enrolled, we put students into groups of no more than 30 people. That is done to simulate a normal classroom. As far as possible, we want the group to operate as a learning community, so you need to limit group size.

Beginning participants are invited to come to a face-to-face orientation session with the rest of their group. This is not compulsory, but most do come. We give them an overview of the course, and outline what is involved in online learning. Then, we take them into the computer room for hands-on experience. Early on, we ask each student to post a profile of themselves onto the forum. Again, this is part of our effort to create some sense of community.

During the orientation, each group meets their facilitator, who is the main contact person. The roles of the facilitator include sending out regular emails, giving feedback to students who request it, and marking assignments.

There is a lot of flexibility in the way this course runs. Students can do all of the preparatory tasks in the module, some or none. The facilitator's role is to encourage interaction with other learners in the group and the learning material.

We encourage students to use the in-built forum to communicate with each other. They have the option of posting a question or comment to their own group or to everyone doing the course. It means they can raise an issue and throw it out for discussion beyond their own group.

We made a decision early on not to go with chat. Most of our students don’t want to commit to a specific time slot, so asynchronous forums suit them better.
If students run into technical difficulties, there is a support facility on the site that they can use, although most technical problems are minimal—often things that are easy to solve, like ‘Acrobat Reader is not working properly’. But technical support is important, particularly given the very different levels of computer experience of our students. That shows up when we’ve done evaluations—we’d get comments like:

‘I found the technology a bit daunting. In fact, it really got in the way of my learning.’

What we’ve learnt from feedback like this is the need to make sure learners are OK with the actual navigation around the site. We also try to use computers as often as possible during face-to-face delivery— that way learners see them as being accessible, really no different from opening a book!

After they’ve done the preparatory work, students elect to be assessed. There are three assessment options for the practical components. They can be assessed in their own workplace by a qualified workplace assessor; they can make a video, to a specification we give them; or they can come to a practical session held at OTEN. We don’t encourage this last option. If we’ve selected our students properly, they should be able to satisfy options one or two.

The level of involvement in forums varies a lot. In each student group, there tends to be an active core of students who are continually posting and responding to comments. Really, this is no different to a traditional classroom, where some students are more active than others.

As I’ve been saying, for most students, the only face-to-face contact would be when they come to an initial orientation, and even this is not compulsory. However, recently I had an experience of a more equal blend of face-to-face and online.

For a commercial client, I delivered the Certificate face-to-face to some of their employees one day per week over 12 weeks. I had assembled a folder full of materials, adapted to the client’s needs and based around their units of competence. When I was teaching, I would always have my computer on so we could check on something from the online module.

Between classes, the employees doing the course were expected to keep working online. We set each learner up with an account, so that if they ran into difficulties, they could email me to get feedback or help. Overall, it was a nice mix. These students enjoyed the benefits of being in a class with other students, but they could also study online at their own pace.
Comments on my own learning...

I’ve done a few formal courses in online and distance education. Through University of Technology Sydney, I did an M Ed in Adult Education, with a major in flexible delivery. This was done as a distance student. I also did a course with Melbourne Institute of Technology dealing with facilitation of online learning. I got a lot out of this. Being an online learner helps you empathise with students and know their frustrations.

I’ve learnt a lot from the experience of running the Certificate. I know there are also professional development courses we could do, such as FAMe. However, we’re so busy, we haven’t really got time to participate at present.
Exemplar 4

Course area: Bridging for Enrolled Nurses

Carole Camp  carole.camp@tafensw.edu.au  TAFE NSW—Hunter Institute

This Exemplar illustrates a nice balance between orderliness and control, on the one hand, and self-direction and reflection on the other.

For a few years, we’ve run a face-to-face bridging course for enrolled nurses. It is normally conducted over 18 weeks, then students are eligible to go directly into second year of the Bachelor of Nursing. However, late last year, the University was asked by one of the private health providers if their enrolled nurses could do the Degree online. The University agreed, and asked TAFE if we would offer the bridging course online as well. The request was to conduct the online course over a slightly shorter period—14 weeks.

The target audience were all nurses working for the health provider somewhere in the eastern states of Australia. Many of them had been nursing for 20 or 30 years, middle-aged women who had never had anything to do with computers.

The plan was to run the whole bridging course online. The only formal face-to-face activity was the assessment of clinical skills and their examinations, which I’ll talk about later.

The bridging course consists of three modules. In designing the online version, we used the on-campus material as a basis. I got some funds with the support of a group in the Hunter region which encourages innovative teaching and learning and helps teachers go online. The nursing unit in TAFE NSW also provided funds, which allowed release time to develop the new course.

When the project was approved, I asked for some extra staff development, and enrolled in the FAMe course. I’m still doing it now. Even though I’d dabbled with computers for years, FAMe has really helped me get the knowledge I need to teach online.

The content of the online course has been influenced by FAMe, which is very activity based. I was fortunate in that our face-to-face bridging course has lots of case material and scenarios which were easy to adapt for online use. Some online material that I’ve seen used in university courses has too much theory and is too dry. There is a tendency to just dump the content onto the screen. So, with the TAFE bridging course, I was keen to get people to work with the information, to do exercises and reflect on what they’d learnt.
Another thing I tried to do was to be clear and realistic about what students had to do. The material would say: ‘This week, you need to do X’. I never had more than three activities for each learning outcome—for example, ‘send me an email and post comments on a forum’.

We had chats. Actually, I don’t like to use that term! It suggests something casual, whereas in the ‘chat’ sessions we ran, students and facilitators were expected to come along with information and contribute. Because the students are working nurses, we organised both a day and an evening chat time-slot, and each student was expected to participate in one of these. It worked—we got almost 100% participation.

When students started the course, they received written information about what was expected. It even detailed the need for computers and printers, and the amount of time they could expect to spend. At the start, even before the course was formally underway, I set up a chat room using the free group website nine.msn. Once the students had been shown what to do, they started participating in chat informally until the course commenced.

When they started, I also buddied them up. I gave them the name of another student, so they each had a buddy they could talk with. I got that idea from the FAMe course. I enjoyed having a buddy, and when we eventually met face-to-face, it was nice.

There were a range of group activities during the course. One that worked well was role play, where everyone was given a role to play—for example, as nurse, patient, relatives, doctors. We had an online case conference, where I played a psychiatric patient. They gained a lot from that.

Where it was possible, students tried to get together. In one case, a few were at the same location, and in other cases, they would travel to meet each other.

As I said earlier, assessment was the only formal face-to-face part of the course. We got the health provider to identify nurses with Cert IV Workplace Assessor or equivalent at each site. We deliberately limited the role, because of how much online work they were required to do each week. I did the theory of medications and the legal side of injections online. Then, in the workplace, they got demonstrations of how to give a subcutaneous injection, and students were assessed doing it.

To help the assessors, I developed a workbook so they would be clear about what the student had learnt and what was expected of them.

In one of the bridging course modules, we’ve been fortunate that the textbooks we prefer to use also comes with a CD. Instead of trying to get funds for fancy graphics and animations, you can advise students to go to their CD and ‘have a look at the diagram’. I’d highly recommend that approach—it will save you a lot of time and money.
In another of the modules, we used a tailor-made CD, which contained copies of all of the learning outcomes and assessment tasks. We took care to format these as if you are logged on and working online. It means that, in the future, it will be easy to transfer the material online.

One thing to take care with is to be more realistic about how much time is involved teaching a course like this. We were only paid for the eight hours per week, but we all did much more.

Another area where you need to be careful is avoiding students sending you lots of emails. It is much better to set up a forum, and have students paste comments in. It means that everyone can have a look and learn. Whereas if they email the teacher, no-one else sees it. And all 20 of them might be emailing the same thing!

We ran this course using the Janison platform. But even when the course was up and running, we still kept the nine.msn chat room active. It proved to be a very useful backup. A few times, when our server was down, we could still have chat sessions. And at the end of the course, some of the students said they’ll stay in touch with the others using the site ninemsn.com.au.

Overall, we were really happy with the outcomes, and so were most of our students. When you look through a range of comments from student evaluations, what comes through is that many of them found the course stimulating and enjoyable:

‘The activities where always a challenge.’

‘You could say that we never got bored. There was always a different direction that needed to be taken.’

Student feedback also suggested that they found us mindful and interested:

‘If I was ever unsure, a quick email sorted any queries.’

‘The facilitators were always looking out for our contributions, whether they were good or otherwise.’

We started with 20 students, and most of them got through the course. We thought that was a miracle, given that it was compressed into 14 weeks and students were required to cover a lot more work each week.

At the end of the course, we had an online ‘party’. We each posted our photos onto the forum, which was fun. We got a lot of very positive feedback from students about this course. And now, a lot of people have heard of it, and are keen to do it next year.
Comments on my own learning...

In terms of my own staff development needs, I’m keen to learn about how to design web pages. When I was developing the nursing course, I had a designer to do the actual design—‘put a picture here, put this text there.’ But it would help if I could do some of that myself.

I’ve also tried to pass on some of what I’ve learnt. This year, I facilitated part of Introduction to Teaching Online, which is a mini-version of FAME.
A few years ago, I became aware that there are quite a few people who can’t do Diploma-level study in child care because they don’t have the Higher School Certificate. Even if you’re mature-aged, you still need a Cert III to get into the Diploma. That’s fine if you can study at TAFE full-time for six months! But there are a lot of people who can’t manage full-time study, but want to do the Diploma. So we set about running a course in child care, at Cert III level, to cater to this group.

The students we were targeting may be at different stages. Some are school leavers who have dropped out in Year 9; some are mature-age and may be studying for the first time in decades.

However, they have a lot in common. They tend to have had little or no exposure to computers. Even the young ones may have left school without using computers.

We’ve also found that they have difficulty with ‘academic speak’. You give them an assignment question, and they may have trouble understanding what you’re after. They often don’t know how to set out an assignment or how to manage study time. Overall, they’re very high maintenance, and need a lot of jollying along, a lot of support and input.

Then there is the issue of self-esteem. They change a lot when they go through a Certificate III. When they finish, it’s ‘Wow, I’ve done this!!’ They’ve blossomed. They can express themselves, they feel validated. But to get to that point, they need a lot of support, and you need to give them options. So we designed a course that would cater to their needs and, at the same time, give them the support they need.

We decided to give them written packages, developed by TAFE NSW. In addition, they get copies of the ANTA Toolboxes on CD. These link with the Janison Toolbox, so we can keep track of what students are doing. Some of them like the Toolboxes, others don’t.
We’ve tried to create a supportive environment in a number of ways. We’ve only got a small core of teachers, which we’ve found works better. If you have too many teachers on a course like this, the students get confused, they don’t know who is looking after what subject.

One catalyst for the course changes was $3000 to field-trial the ANTA Toolbox in child care. Having received the funding, we were obliged to trial the materials, and that resulted in more planning and review. Every week, I’d meet with the other two staff to review the issues and lessons, including the material on the Toolbox.

We wanted the program to be flexible. However, we also recognised that if it was completely self-directed, it would not work. So we put a lot of thought into how to include face-to-face contact.

There were two main components. The first was a day-long Saturday workshop each month. Each of the teaching staff spent time presenting to the group at each workshop.

The second face-to-face component was what we promoted as a ‘drop-in session’, one evening each week. We ran this upstairs in our learning centre. The centre has computers, a telephone, TV and video, and work tables. On the night of the drop-in, we’d station one teacher upstairs in the learning centre, although she could always phone down for backup if she needed another teacher’s help. Sometimes, things would get very busy upstairs, but more commonly, a group of perhaps five or six regular students would meet and work through the materials.

The other two teachers would be stationed downstairs, taking calls. We always log these calls, so we have a record of who is staying in touch and what is causing difficulties. Wednesday evening has always been the night students can get help by phone. Actually, it is best if, right at the beginning of the course, you let them know that ‘…if you’re going to do this course, you need to be available on Wednesday nights.’
Comments on my own learning...

I’ve always been fairly computer-literate. Early on, I did a Certificate III in Information Technology, and I’ve done a number of short training courses—for example, a two-day instructional design course, and one on developing websites. I also did a course on Janison Toolbox, and I’m currently doing Facilitating and Managing eLearning (FAME).

But 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. Recently, I facilitated Introduction to Teaching Online.

I’ve learnt from all of these experiences. Looking back, a lot of our earlier approaches were too teacher-driven. I’ve learnt the importance of being activity and student-driven.

Another lesson I’ve learnt is that there are usually ways around problems if you’re flexible. Our drop-in centre is an example, and it has been a big success. Another example is that we wanted our students to have a practical experience of conducting a play session. So during one of the weekend workshops, we arranged for parents to bring their young children, something that had not previously happened in our campus for flexible students. Even having students using things like email and fax to communicate with staff is fairly new.

I suppose the central theme in this is empowerment. We try to empower our students to express their needs, but staff like myself have also become more empowered, trying new things and finding new solutions.
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.
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. 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.
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.
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/], 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, 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] 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’.
Over the last few years, we’ve been developing a Diploma for quarry managers, which has a variety of elements—including learning from web-based, interactive resources, from the industry, from equipment suppliers, and from staff, and learning and assessment at work. We’ve tried to combine all of these elements holistically.

An important feature of the course is its close links with industry. The program management committee includes representatives from a variety of companies, industry groups, the Mining ITAB and the Department of Mineral Resources. They provide us with advice on the ongoing running of the course, along with access to the expertise of the Institute of Quarrying.

The Institute is an important group for us. It has almost 2000 Australian members. We’ve got a very strong link with this group, and their secretariat are a useful conduit for getting advice and information from members.

First, some background. For many years, quarrying was regarded by many as the poor cousin of underground and open-cut mining. But there was a strong push from the industry to upgrade the skills and qualifications of quarrying managers. Legislation was introduced which means you now need a Diploma or equivalent to run a quarry. TAFE NSW—Illawarra Institute is now the major provider of Quarry training.

For learners wanting to do the Diploma, they and their companies tend to have a very high level of motivation. If you were to do the whole Diploma face-to-face in the traditional attendance pattern, it would take between 10 and 12 hrs of class-time per week over three years.

The students coming into the course are a mixed group. Some have been in the industry for years, others have come in as graduate trainees and are looking to train in quarry management. About half are graduate engineers, with the rest from a variety of mainly technical backgrounds. Quite a number would have liked to undertake training in the past, but were frustrated by the delivery options available:
‘For the best part of 10 years, I have attempted to find a course that could provide me with the quarry manager qualification [but] the courses that I started all required me to attend their classrooms for weeks on end… My colleagues and I could not leave our quarry sites… due to duty of care obligations. It is not surprising that many of us did not get very far with out studies.’

Most students choose to start with a one week, face-to-face orientation in which we go over things like how to be an independent, web-based learner. This orientation is not compulsory, but we strongly recommend that they do it. At the orientation, we help them with time management, and we start work on some of the competencies. They might be working online on a module, with information going backwards and forwards to a teacher a few hundred metres away. They practice the online work like this, and if they get into difficulty, the teacher can walk over and help them.

Another advantage of starting off with a face-to-face session is that it allows students to get to know each other. Often, in this industry, people have heard of each other but may not have actually met. So the orientation can be the starting point for warm friendships, which continue to grow via things like chat sessions.

After the orientation, they’re on their way. When they enroll, a lot of what they are drawing on are not artificially created resources. Instead, we use hyperlinks on the course website to direct them through to current legislation and commentary. This is a critical aspect of the course. The legislation and technical information impacting on our industry is ever-changing, and we didn’t want to spend time trying to update it. We’ve got copyright permission to go straight to the source. As legislation is updated, or as new commentary is made, our students get to see the current material.

We’ve tried hard to make the best use of available resources. A few years ago, New Zealand put a lot of effort into producing written training materials for the quarry industry. It was a very valuable resource, and they have allowed us to build that into the course.

We also provide some dedicated learning resources. Most of this material was developed as a TAFE NSW learningware product, drawing on the expertise of teachers and people from industry. There might be notes on how to implement continuous improvement, or photos of quarry sites which you can examine by ‘virtual tour’. The task might be to examine the site and identify all the hazards. Learning resources like this can be accessed online, but we also supply it on a CD, to save students having to download it. A lot of them don’t have broadband access, so downloads can be slow.

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9 Extract from a letter from a past student of the program.
Now, let's talk about other parts of the course. Students liaise with staff by email but, apart from that, we have scheduled two-hour chat sessions over two nights. The timing (one starts at 6 pm, the other at 8 pm) is significant because our students come from different time-zones, from New Zealand across to Perth. The two different time slots allow for these differences.

Throughout the Diploma, we maintain an online help desk. All of the normal sorts of things that you would get if you turned up to a face-to-face course, such as advice, counselling, and other services, are available through the help desk. Access is all by email.

We also use tutors, who are in effect their part-time teachers. There are 19 subjects in the Diploma, and for each, we assign a teacher with expertise in the area. It means that when we are having a chat session, we will program it around a subject area, and the designated teacher will be actively involved in facilitating the chat. So it's like a face-to-face seminar on a topic, only run online.

We have also introduced the role of on-site mentor and assessor. The person in this role may be someone senior at the same quarry as the student, or someone local who is a member of the Institute of Quarrying. Often, the mentors or assessors we use are actually District Inspectors of Mines.

The core requirement of the course is to work through a comprehensive self-help checklist. This helps the student prepare portfolios of evidence for assessment. So in each module, there will be statement like: ‘To complete this Unit, you will need to demonstrate competency X and, to do that, the type of evidence you will need to supply is Y’.

Let’s take an example, and I’ll explain how all this comes together. Suppose the competency the student is working on relates to risk assessment, and part of the evidence required is the ‘design and implementation of a risk assessment policy for your quarry’. The Department of Mineral Resources has a parallel requirement. They want each mine to have its own risk assessment policy. And the one who signs this off is the Inspector, who may also be the student’s mentor or assessor.

So you can see how well it is integrated. The students demonstrate competency, using the range of resources and hyperlinks available to them; the company gets its risk assessment policy, and the Department of Mines can sign off on the fact that quarries are looking after risk assessment.

Sometimes, when a few of the students are working on a problem, they come up with something that goes beyond their expertise. What they can do is send that back to us and, if it is tricky, we can send it on to the Institute of Quarrying Expertise, who will open it up for comment by members. It is as if the learner has access to 2000 teachers! A query like this might get 20 or 30 replies.

To me, ‘blended learning’ involves a mix of learning online and learning on-the-job through action projects, supported by their mentor.
Face-to-face learning is part of the mix as well. Not only do most students attend the initial orientation, but face-to-face learning may occur throughout the Diploma. Perhaps the student spends some time working with equipment suppliers, to learn how to manage that part of the business. Perhaps they attend an industry-run seminar, and that is part of the learning, too. Or the student may enroll in a face-to-face Frontline Management course, which is one of the competency areas in the Diploma.

But I want to emphasise that the course is extremely flexible. You can get through without any face-to-face, and the course is fully self-paced. We had one student who didn’t come to the orientation, and who managed to complete all requirements in seven months! That is exceptional, but it shows what can be done. Right now, we’ve negotiating an agreement to offer the Diploma to a string of quarries in the United States. As far as we have been able to discover, there is no other online Diploma for quarry managers anywhere in the world.

Comments on our own learning...

My staff and I have obviously learnt a lot as we’ve set this up over the last few years. We’ve learnt technical skills, like managing chat sessions and designing websites. But just as important have been skills in managing the learning, the pedagogical aspects.

We’ve had a lot of help along the way. We’ve done LearnScope projects, we’ve done ReFraming the Future projects. In the process, we’ve become very close to the Institute of Quarrying, and to some of the major corporations.

A key lesson has been the shift from ‘what do we want to teach’ to ‘where do we fit into the industry and to the requirements of individual companies’. The whole program has been a huge learning curve, and we’re still learning as we go.
At the moment, I’m trialling a module that I developed for TAFE NSW—Sydney Institute with the assistance and skills of the Centre for Innovative Learning and Teaching (CILT). The module is called Care of Floristry Stock and Merchandise. It is a requirement for anyone enrolled in various Certificates in floristry.

I need to point out that we haven’t finished the trial yet—we’re only partway through. Students have not yet submitted their first assessment.

The online module deals with botany and horticulture-related knowledge. An average florist might use 300 or 400 types of flowers and leaves. What I did was to go and take digital photographs of a large cross-section of these flowers and leaves, and put them online. As far as I know, the result is unique, and I’m very pleased with it. It is fairly complete. You can click on a photograph and see it in enlargement, and the module contains a lot of theoretical and reference material as well.

Some sections of the industry would love to grab this resource! We debated how to make the material available to students, whether to distribute it by CD. But in the end, for security reasons, we decided to put it out through TAFE’s Janison platform, so that we can keep tighter control over it.

Students started the module with a three-hour, face-to-face induction. Two members of CILT and I met with the students. We began by going through our expectations, organised passwords and pin numbers, and went over how we could keep in touch electronically. I tried to give them a picture of how much work they were expected to do, at least two hours per week. Then, we gave them time to explore the site. They practised logging on, looked at the Janison features, and at the course material.

The induction went well. Some of the students even applauded when they saw the quality and amount of information that was available!
Issues of acceptable online conduct need to be discussed early in the sessions. Other important considerations like not sharing or giving out passwords and PIN numbers to others must be mentioned.

Some of my students are familiar with computers, but others are not. So I couldn’t assume that they would be comfortable with things like emailing. I wanted to be sure that any lack of computer skills would not get in the way of the subject matter. I made sure there were always options for people without easy access to a computer, like being able to submit assignments in writing. I also got them all to send me an email, so I was confident they could email me for help if they needed it. Students without email addresses were assisted in getting a Hotmail address [hotmail.com]. In retrospect, it is important to set up high level screening for such an address. Otherwise, you can get a multitude of spam messages.

As time’s gone by, I’ve realised that a few of them are still struggling with the basics, like getting onto the site. Next time, I’ll hand out some simple, step-by-step notes covering things like logging on and moving around the Janison site in the introductory session. Appropriate notes were created and distributed to struggling students as the problem was realised.

Students must have a full knowledge of assessment tasks early on, probably in the introductory session to motivate the group. Students unaware of assessments are slow to get online and end up requiring face-to-face to get them moving.

The online floristry module has three assessment tasks, each based on the information and photographs I’ve provided. They do the first two by themselves, and email the results to me. The third assessment is going to be on campus as a group. Using a data projector, what I intend to do is project some of the photographs onto a screen, and give them assessment tasks relating to these images. I think that, in the interests of validity and reliability, some assessment should happen face-to-face.

I keep in touch with students in a variety of ways. I use Janison to check on who is logging on, and how often. The danger with teaching online is the students who are shy or under-performing can draw back and, before you know it, they have disappeared into cyberspace. So you need to intervene before that happens. Regular contact is essential!

These students are studying other floristry modules on campus, so it is easy to see them and help with any difficulties. I’ve also emailed them a reminder that I’m happy to discuss any problems they’re having, and on two occasions, I’ve organised blocks of time in the computer room to meet with any students who need assistance.

I’ve found it is important to prepare other teachers who have face-to-face contact with the students. They are a key link in the communication chain. You might need to spend time on what they should say or not say, and how they should respond to questions about the online module.
It is early days yet, but we have got some preliminary feedback from students about the module. A common theme in their comments is that, while they’ve found the online resource very valuable, they would not like to see the program go completely online. Face-to-face still plays an important role in their learning:

‘The online materials are an excellent tool, but I don’t think they’re a substitute for face-to-face.’

‘I benefited a lot from the face-to-face classes, and had a great time.’

‘Using the online resources is fine later in the term, but I’d rather start with more face-to-face. That way, you get the benefits of talking and you can clear up your own weaknesses. Then you feel more confident working online by yourself.’

Comments on my own learning...

The online module was developed with the support of Sydney Institute, and they and others have taken a lot of interest. For me, it’s been a steep learning curve.

Even though I’m generally computer-literate, this is the first time I’ve been involved in things like website design. The people from the CILT 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.

I’ve also done Introduction to Teaching Online. I both struggled and enjoyed participating in the online project work, where you’re in the role of learner. It taught me a lot about the issues that come up, and how they affect the online learner.
This Exemplar illustrates that even young students, who are often stereotyped as being computer-savvy, may in fact lack confidence in using computers, and may need considerable face-to-face support.

I first got interested in the possibilities of online learning when I was teaching in small TAFE colleges in places like Leeton and Narrandera. After my time at Leeton, I moved to Albury, which is a bigger campus. Once there, I began taking more interest in the possibilities of combining face-to-face teaching with online.

In regional centres, you can get some small class sizes and, in a particular subject area, you may not have teachers with expertise in areas that only a few students want. So you need to think more flexibly, and to consider the alternatives. Online approaches can be very useful for subjects like this.

For example, suppose you’ve got students at Leeton, but the only qualified teacher in a particular subject like Science is at Albury. So the question becomes, how can you combine online learning with face-to-face in a way that gives students the best access to this teacher.

Perhaps your class can involve students from different locations, working off common materials and doing some of their work online. This is pretty much a ‘virtual’ classroom, but not everything happens online—there are a few students at each campus who work together face-to-face, and there is a part-time tutor who provides some support. Ideally, contact with the tutor is face-to-face and could be from a different subject discipline, although tutorial assistance can be provided online or by phone hookup from a ‘subject expert’.

Most of the students I teach are doing Year 10 at TAFE (the Certificate in General and Vocational Education). Many are recent school leavers, while some have been out of school and now want to return to study. Most are in their late teens, although sometimes they are mature-age.
From my experience with these types of students, it is not appropriate to put the whole subject online. Often, they need help to stay focused. The purely text-based format of most online learning demands too much concentration and self-motivation as well as specific language and study skills. Spending at least some of their time working with other students in the same room feels more natural because learning is a social process. The online environment can also be used as a social support for isolated students in the use of a virtual classroom. Of course, as students become more used to working in this way, it may be possible to move from blended teaching that includes online support, towards fuller online delivery.

All online learning should progress like this. You start using online learning for support, but gradually, you expect students to take more and more initiative as they become more independent learners. For example, in subjects like Science, you get them to search out knowledge using the internet.

In the vision for CGVE Online, students will be able to socialise in the virtual classroom, and move towards looking at and downloading course material. This is an important feature for these students, whose attendance can be fairly variable. The ability to log in and download course materials means that no-one misses out.

This option raises the question of what constitutes satisfactory participation in courses offered partly online. This can be an issue when students have various financial obligations such as Youth Allowances. I’d be in favour of taking log-ins into account as one measure of course participation, and Janison Toolbox allows you the administrative tracking facilities to do that.

There is often an assumption around that all young people are great with computers. However, that’s not my experience. In fact, when I was asking a few of my students about their knowledge of computers, their response was that they were too old (they were in their late teens!)—the ones really familiar with using computers were primary school aged.

The moral is—instead of making assumptions about students’ knowledge of computers, talk with them about what they know and what their needs and interests are. Many of my students need some extra help with computing. I’ve found one way that can occur in the CGVE is by including computing in their Certificate subjects. They can use part of their time—perhaps 30 minutes per week—to get help with the computing aspects of their online learning.

We are at the point of training staff in teaching and moderating online, and in the use of Janison Toolbox and other software for the development of e-learning resources. However, the bottom line is funding, both for the development of resources and the online learning environment, and for the ongoing maintenance of this environment.

Most importantly, teachers need to be paid to teach online which, in many ways, is more time consuming than face-to-face classes. If the vision for online learning is to succeed, administration needs to get on board with the dollars, to make sure staff are being paid for the hours they put into development.
Comments on my own learning...

At Leeton, I had embarked on a Masters Degree in Open and Distance Learning through University of Southern Queensland, to try to find out more. I’m getting to the end of that now. My final project is on the topic: ‘E-learning and the 15 to 19 year old student—Towards making it happen in TAFE’.

Actually, 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 an e-moderation course, invaluable.

When you study online yourself, you experience how it works. I have learnt a lot from the Masters, and a number of subjects deal directly with teaching online and with web-based education.

Apart from the Masters Degree, which encourages you to communicate with and learn from your fellow students from all over the world, working in different educational fields, I have tried to learn more about online learning from a variety of sources. I took part in NET*Working 2002, which was very useful. I made a lot of contacts, and gained quite a lot of knowledge and experience from the workshops.

I have also attended seminars at other Institutes, including a one-day session showcasing what Victorian TAFE has been doing using their TAFE Virtual Campus, and training in the use of software for managing online learning (Janison Toolbox). You also learn a lot from things you hear other people doing, and from your own experience.

I was part of a LearnScope project at Albury, and that was a particularly valuable experience. We set out to design a Virtual Learning Community (VLC) among staff members, based on the idea of Thiagi’s Communities of Practice. The VLC ‘classroom’, or meeting room, was designed using the Janison Toolbox, with the assistance of our technical people at the Institute.

We wanted to ensure that the virtual classroom was supportive and fun. The whole point was to encourage our staff to learn online, and to chat with (and support) each other. Online learning is no different from face-to-face—the main way people learn is through dialogue with other students and teachers.
I am involved in teaching the Certificate in General Vocational Education (CGVE) at Bega Institute on a part-time and casual basis. Our students are typically young people (15–19) who are returning to study on a full-time basis, although some are older. Students in each group have varying levels of ability, and many are highly intelligent. Programs like this cater to students who are considered ‘at risk’, since they dropped out of school before completing their formal education.

Our initial thought was that an online approach would be a useful addition to face-to-face teaching. So, with some colleagues, we decided to experiment with some online techniques, such as forums, email and synchronous chat.

Using funding we had received from TAFE’s Access Division, we set up the course. The course aim was to familiarise students with online communications and some of the learning potential of computers. We used a chat game, something like ‘Celebrity Heads’, which had been designed for base level computer users.

The course had some successes, but there were a number of challenges as well. One of the big issues was that in going online, we were immediately confronted by the different levels of our students. Some were very quick to complete the tasks and, because some have a short attention span, they quickly became frustrated. A few students in this category couldn’t see how the task we had given them was relevant.

When we first conducted the course, we tried to ensure that we were well-prepared. Even though there were only around 15 students, we had three teachers to look after the group, including one IT teacher. The classes took place in a computer lab with 20 or so computers.

Despite this level of resourcing, we were all flat out. Each of the teachers involved felt under enormous pressure, running from student to student, trying to keep them focused on the task and to sort out their difficulties.

Afterwards, the staff involved all met and reflected on what had been learnt, and on how we could build on this experience. Our plan was to extend beyond this single-classroom experiment, and involve classes on other campuses. So we called for volunteers, and got expressions of interest from people in two other centres.
Running the course synchronously across three campuses proved even more challenging. Just establishing a suitable time proved to be quite a hurdle. We made a few attempts, but only one other group came online each time. On one occasion, when we had finally settled on a suitable timeslot, the Institute changed the timetable to accommodate another group needing to use the Lab. Nevertheless, we persevered, and tried to learn from these experiences.

Probably the nicest thing about these experiments was to see the way some students engaged in the interaction, enjoying posting comments and receiving replies from their peers on other campuses.

There were some technical problems we had to deal with. For some reason, one of the IT guys helping us, moved the site we were using, but only some of us knew that. The result was that at one point, we had each campus logged on to, and trying to use, a different site. To be fair, though, the individual who did this, like the other staff involved, was giving us his time for free.

Then there were class management challenges. During the exercises, some of our students posted comments couched in very inappropriate language during a chat session. One can understand this behaviour, given that some would have only used home computers for recreational chat. Nevertheless, we quickly realised the need for an online moderator who can exclude people from the chat when appropriate.

It is also helpful to build in ways to deal with ability differences. Ideally, it is best if you can organise online work on two levels, one to cater to people with basic skills, the other for people who are brighter and have more substantial computer skills. Due to the nature of on-line communication, I recommend that the students should multi-task—that is, work on another computer based project while they are engaged in chat.
 Comments on my own learning…

Some of my most valuable learning has come from experience. For one thing, the experience of being involved in teaching online has highlighted how many skills that you need to do it well. General computer skills are not enough. There are also scheduling challenges, technical problems, and class management issues. It is understandable that some of the teachers who worked on this initiative felt (and expressed) considerable frustration at times.

The initiatives I’ve been involved in have also given me ideas about how you can maximise learning from experience. For example, you should include a debrief after doing something new, so that people can go over what they’ve learnt and what they’d do differently next time. Often, a first attempt to introduce some online teaching will result in new learning which, in turn, is a springboard to trying out something more ambitious.

Right now, I feel a lot of excitement about the possibilities. In fact, we are currently developing a more complex, blended module dealing with CGVE English. This builds on the experience described above, but uses a situation that many students will be able to relate to—moving out of home, and finding a place to rent—to develop skills in areas like preparing business correspondence and conducting internet searches.
Exemplar 14

Course area: Genealogy

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This Exemplar illustrates the supportive value of the classroom environment when learners are first starting to go online.

I have combined online with face-to-face in a number of ways. At the moment, I’m running a course about genealogy—that is, for people who want to find out about their ancestry. People come into the course with some family information and an interest in finding out more, and I take it from there.

When learners start the course, they get a CD with basic software like Acrobat Reader and WinZip, a list of census data available on the internet, and a free program developed by the Mormons that was designed to support searching for family information and recording that information. The CD will allow them to load the software onto their home computers. Once it is installed, learners can work away at home, then bring the results back to class and do some more work there.

While the course is about genealogy, participants also learn a great deal about using computers. If they’re not familiar already, they learn to use email, to do various sorts of searches on the internet, to use databases and to participate in lists.

A list is an online community of people who communicate with each other via email on certain set topics. The community functions with the support of a moderator. Once you’ve joined, you can post queries, and usually someone will try to help. For example, one of my students wanted to investigate their family history in a county in Wales. A member of the list based over there had access to the archives, and mailed my student the information she was seeking.

The class in genealogy is fairly small—six people. They come from very different backgrounds. I’ve got everyone from the President of the local historical society to farmers. Their knowledge of computers varies a lot.

When you have people in the group who are not very strong on computers, it is better to include some face-to-face contact. If all of my students were experienced computer users, you could easily conduct the whole course online. I did a course myself on genealogy that was totally online, and I enjoyed it—but I’m used to computers. But when people who are less experienced get stuck, it helps to have the structure and support of the classroom. Feedback from students bears this out:
'I found the course very interesting and learnt quite a lot from the internet resources. But I've probably learnt more through talking to our teacher face to face.'

'I have limited computer skills, and could not have done this course without a tutor present. At the end of the course I had learnt a lot about using the computer and the internet generally. Now, I think I could use the internet alone.'

'I have no Internet connection at home, so having this course in a classroom with access was great.'

Even though people come along with their own projects that they want to work on, there is a definite structure to the class. One week, we might all look at a particular set of web resources together, and each class-member applies these to their projects. Another week, we'll do something different.

It doesn't always go smoothly. Sometimes, it's a struggle to stay in control. For example, in one recent class, things started to go sideways. What can happen is that your time gets taken up with the less skilled people, who can easily get stuck. You bounce from one question and demand to another, and before you know it, you've lost control. By then, the more capable people have rushed ahead, and they get lost, too. They are not sure what is supposed to happen next.

So you need a definite structure, and you need to resist the sense of urgency people put out when they run into difficulty. Next time I run this, I'm planning on having a timetable I give students so they know what to expect each session: 'For the next 30 minutes, we will be doing X. For the next hour, we will do Y.'

Another thing I've learnt from running this course is that it would be useful to do some sort of pre-course survey or assessment to determine people's level of computer skills. I haven't done that with this group, and it took me a while to discover how much people knew or didn't know. It's taken a while to appreciate their range.

If you were observing my class, one thing you'd really notice would be the excitement in the room when someone finds something they've been looking for. Like my student getting the information from Wales. It was great!

You'd also notice people's frustration at times. We're working in a networked lab with only modem access to the internet, so sites can take an age to open and to move through. I'm hoping this is about to change. We're part of the Rural Link project, which is working towards faster network access. They're putting up a dish now, so hopefully this whole area will improve. But access speed is a big issue in all rural areas.

Overall, this course has been a big success. People don't want it to end. It is really only introductory, learning the tools you need to investigate your ancestry. But there is scope to go much further, and that is what I anticipate my group will do. The Mormon software lets you move on to a higher level—for example, to display the information you've collected on your own tailor-made website, so your family history is online. You can also create and display your family tree.
Another course development project that I’m involved in is for people wanting to improve their literacy. They enroll in the accredited Certificate in General Education for Adults. Typically, people who do the course have left school early. Online learning is good for this group because you can have people doing the course from different locations.

At the moment, it is not run purely online. But beginning next year, you’ll have a choice. You will be able to do it fully online, or through a mix of online and face-to-face.

The concept I’ve got for this course is to use an Adult Learning Australia Learning Circle kit called ‘Discovering Democracy’. These kits are designed for self-directed discussion groups, but what attracted me is that this one has a lot of activities that involve basic literacy skills. You’re expected to analyse ideas, to make comments, to write reports, and it is all related to life in Australia and different forms of government.

Next year, this will be a pilot, but the plan after that is to integrate it into the accredited literacy course.

Comments on my own learning...

I’ve moved gradually into using more online approaches. Early on, I did a few courses. For example, over the internet, I enrolled in and completed a course in HTML and website design. That gave me exactly what I wanted—the ability to design a simple website.

I also participated in a course funded by LearnScope, which was called Online ACE 2001. This was a course for TAFE and ACE practitioners, run over ten weeks. It looked at a wide range of online options, like chat, lists and various sites. This year, I was involved in Online ACE 2002 as one of the facilitators.

I participated in NET*Working 2002. It was good, but not as good as it was when they first ran it in 2000. There was too much happening on the site this time, and I didn’t participate much. They are running something similar in Victoria soon, and I will be one of the hosts. One of the sessions I’m co-presenting looks at what it is like to be an online mentor.

I work for Learning Services in New England Area Health Service, which is one of 18 units that make up the NSW Health Registered Training Organisation. Up until two years ago, all of our training was face-to-face.

We offer a range of accredited qualifications—for example, training and assessment; aged care; project management; and frontline management for health staff and workers from other agencies e.g., Local Council, HACC. Our unit is also responsible for addressing other organisational learning needs, including first aid, fire and security.

We’re the only unit in NSW Health RTO with a substantial involvement in flexible delivery. A typical course we run starts off with a half-day face-to-face orientation. We’ve tried doing this session by video for candidates who cannot attend in person, but it doesn’t work. It is better to get everyone together. If people are not used to learning online, we show them what to do during the introductory session.

What happens after that depends on learner needs, skill levels (prior learning is formally assessed) and the course. If someone needs help, we give it over the phone. Learners also have on-screen instructions that provide guidance.

We give people various resources to support their online learning. Some of them can be downloaded from the intranet, others are distributed by CD. Where they’re available, we use the ANTA Toolboxes, and put them on CD. For people who are not computer-literate, we also give out print copies of the material they need.

In a typical course, every month or two there is a face-to-face session, perhaps for a few hours. At the moment, we’re assessing whether we could use videoconferencing for these face-to-face sessions during the course.

What you end up with in most of our courses is a mix of face-to-face and distance materials—online, CD, videoconference, and print. We also use a software program called Discus [www.discusware.com] to support asynchronous discussion groups with people studying for the same qualification. It works best when it is managed properly, and there is a reason for the discussion. Otherwise, you can run into problems with lack of structure. The online discussion can become just a meeting place.
In a lot of cases, the people who live in one town studying a course will get together. We don’t organise it, the groups are self-starting and self-supporting.

The catalyst for us to go down the online track was a LearnScope project which I was involved in during 2002. You can use something like that 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, so the LearnScope project helped a lot.

Over the last few years, we’ve trained a lot of trainers. In the New England region alone, we have several hundred accredited trainers and assessors. One of our priorities for the future is to harness these people, so that they’re more directly involved in the training of others.

Another change that will happen in the near future will be the more widespread availability of broadband. Once that is in place, I expect us to make more use of videoconference, and for people to make more use of our internet site rather than using CD.

Comments on my own learning...

I got interested in the possibilities of online learning through working in corporate HR roles. When I moved to health, it was quite a culture shock. There is a general tendency in the health system to only value classroom learning delivered by experts. There is little encouragement of self-directed learning. The view that ‘if you’re using computers at work, you’re playing’ doesn’t help much either.

I’ve pushed in the opposite direction. I’ve been fortunate to have the leadership and support of a dynamic and visionary manager, and we’ve tried to move training away from classroom delivery towards self-directed learning.

I’m a Flexible Learning Leader at the moment. Just as I did with LearnScope, I’ve tried to use the Leader role to drive change. For example, we’ve just finished putting a large group of 100 educators through a course in how to learn online, and we’ve got a waiting list of others who also want to do it. The next step is to develop a change management plan for flexible learning for the NSW Health RTO.

One thing this type of course has reinforced for me is that you need to actually experience online learning to appreciate how it works. Actually doing it opens your eyes!
Exemplar 16

Course area: Horse Industry Studies and Supervision

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This Exemplar illustrates the careful thought that can go into designing an online module, not only in terms of the ‘look’, but in terms of achieving a balance between flexibility and structure.

Three years ago, funds for online course development became available in TAFE. We saw a window of opportunity, and we jumped in, applying for funding to develop online courses for the horse industry (‘the Equine Online project’). In all, we’ve received a total of three lots of funding.

The result is that by the end of this year, all of our equine courses up to Cert IV level will be available as online modules. So far, there are 18 modules being offered online, including two that are basically learning contracts.

Before we developed the first module, we spent almost six months working out a template. We made a mockup, and showed it to people like storemen who have similar backgrounds to our students. Right from that early period, our focus has been on students, on how the modules would work for them in practice.

While the online modules themselves are delivered completely online, the Certificate also involves regular residentials. Depending on what they’re studying, students might attend three or four times per year.

They like meeting other students. We usually throw a barbecue to help them relax. Until they meet for the first time, they are somewhat reluctant to email each other or share their views online. But once they’ve met, it gets easier.

Our students need a fair degree of flexibility, because of the type of work they do and their location. Flexibility needs to be part of the module design. Some modules we’ve seen from other areas are very rigid, with everything fixed. But our modules have scope for each teacher to insert assessment tasks, biography, and timetable, as well as to contextualise the material (for example, by including information relating to the local area and the particular student group).

But you can take flexibility too far. We’ve avoided the ‘anywhere, anytime’ approach—it can become a nightmare. For example, we run a timetable, because most of our students asked for one. They need to know clearly when things are due, and they need limits.

11 Kim Billingham, who teaches in the area of agribusiness, also participated in parts of the discussion.
We don’t encourage our students to go off searching through the internet for information. Even though there is a lot of good information out there, there is also a lot of rubbish. An important skill is distinguishing the good stuff from the rubbish. Ideally, all students should do a module that deals with how to locate, use and assess the value of information. It is something our students are not very good at.

Student characteristics have a big impact on what you can do as an online facilitator. For example, our students can’t type, so chats don’t work. It takes too long for anyone to reply! Another thing we’ve discovered about our students is that they are terrified of doing something wrong on the computer. Remember, only a small minority have used computers before. They fear that if they try out something, they’ll break it.

It is important to manage expectations about email, to limit turnaround expectations to perhaps 48 hrs. That means that we expect part-timers to check their email every two days. We also try to cut down on the amount of individual emailing. For example, if someone emails us a question, we would often reply by forum, on the assumption that others will have the same query. It also gives the opportunity for our students to discuss whatever has been raised. If it is a sensitive topic, you need to ask the student first before posting their query.

One of our concerns, as a development team, is that there seems to be too little emphasis placed on implementation and logistical issues. A module may look good, but it also needs to work in practice. It is essential to trial all new modules. It takes a little longer, but it means people end up with a product that has been tested. All of our modules have gone through at least one pilot, and usually two, before they are released.

**Comments on our own learning…**

Almost all of our learning has been from experience, although some of us have done things like workshops in instructional design. 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.

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! But it has since been stopped, perhaps because some people felt their work might be being criticised, or that they didn’t like people seeing an unfinished product. The environment for developing online modules has also become more competitive since then, and people are less willing to reveal the approach they’re taking.
Exemplar 17

Course area: Information Technology

Katrina Sommers  katrina@maremmano.com  Lismore

This Exemplar illustrates ways of making learning involving, interactive and, most of all, fun.

I teach various computer subjects in a Community College, as part of the Certificate III in Information Technology. My students are a mixed bunch. Some are young people completing high school, some are people who have left school and are now coming back to study in an effort to improve their job prospects, but by far the largest group are people over 30 (and even as old as 60 or more). Most of them, particularly the older ones, are paying their own way, and are very motivated to learn.

A lot of my students are not very computer literate when they start off, so my focus is on making things easier for them and providing as much support as possible. That is where it is good to back up the face-to-face classroom contact with online support.

Take a subject like ‘Website Design’. Students might be given a task to do between classes, such as:

■ find the best and worst websites you can
■ post them for others to have a look at
■ evaluate each other’s sites in an online discussion with other class members.

Students are expected to participate in forums and email groups between classes, and a task like this generates a lot of online discussion. It usually works very well. Between classes, people do their research, then display their results. After that, they have a look at what others have come up with, and comment on it.

I think it is a good idea to let students continue to participate in class discussions even after they’ve finished the subject. In the case of Website Design, I have ex-students who have designed interesting sites, and I encourage them to post these for current students to have a look at. Occasionally, one of these ex-students will ask me a question online, but that doesn’t happen very often. The benefits of their continued involvement far outweigh the occasional bit of extra work.
Another subject I teach is ‘Database Creation’. This is a subject where there are often a lot of questions, as people get the idea of designing their own databases. I try to hang back a little from answering these directly. Instead, I create the expectation that students will help each other work through their problems. By doing so, they learn a lot more.

The way we manage all of this is using a free site available to anyone, www.groups.yahoo.com. This has a lot of features that suit classes like mine. If you set up a group on this site, it can be password-protected, and you can stop yourself from being bombarded by advertising emails. You can even prevent other people who visit the site from knowing that your group exists.

The site allows you to post website addresses of interest, so that others can have a look. A big advantage is that you can allow participants in your group to upload files. For example, in the Database course, a student can upload a database they’re working on which has some design problems. Others in the group are encouraged to have a look at the screens and the code, and suggest improvements.

I think one of the most important things in blending online and face-to-face teaching is to make the learning fun. It sounds easy, but a lot of courses are not fun at all. I’m very aware of that at the moment because I’m studying a post-graduate course in online learning at one of the universities, and it is as dry as bones!

I try to make my classes refreshing. Many teachers would agree that you’re not there just to instruct, to dish out knowledge. Instead, good teaching is about facilitating learning, and encouraging students to be self-directed. But I think even that is not sufficient. You need to demonstrate that learning is a good experience, that learning is fun.

After all, when you think back later on a course, you don’t only remember what you learnt; you also remember how you felt in the group, how much you enjoyed the learning.

If you handle online learning properly, students won’t realise how hard they’re being pushed. They don’t feel the pressure because they’ve having a good time. They want to learn more! That’s when you see the real lifelong learning concept.

Another principle I think is important is to recognise (and value) the fact that different people have different preferred learning styles. In the online environment, that means accepting the different ways that people get involved, and presenting the material in various ways to cater to these differences.

For example, some students are comfortable putting forward their ideas off the top of their head during a chat session, whereas others hold back. But in some of my courses, we include the requirement that everyone has to record their reflections about what happened during the week and what they’ve learnt. Typically, the people who are reluctant to participate in chat sessions are quieter, more reflective types who come up with some very insightful comments once they’ve had time to think.
Another example of catering to differences is to provide readings that people can download, with structured exercises where appropriate. This suits people who like everything to be well-planned and clear. It complements the more informal style of online forums that we also use.

Things are going to keep changing in the online learning area. When I look into the future, I can see the boundary between ‘pure online’ and ‘blended learning’ breaking down. After all, with improved bandwidths, it will soon be possible for students to see each other and their teacher, so all online learning will always include face-to-face dimension.

Comments on my own learning...

I’ve had a lot of very good learning experiences. I started experimenting with online teaching three years ago after being a participant in one of the LearnScope projects in our region. This was very much at the grassroots level, investigating what online learning is all about. During that time, I also attended a conference, and some of the presentations I heard really grabbed my attention.

Things I did during the last two years have built on the LearnScope project and on my early experiments. I subsequently did a course funded by LearnScope on how to teach online. This year, I was one of the facilitators of this same course. I’ve also been involved in projects designed to get other teachers in the ACE sector to go online.

A lot of my learning has come from mistakes or difficulties. When you first run part or all of 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. Yet, most of my students have loved the online component of their learning. I’ve had some great feedback. One recent group has banded together and convinced the College to run the course again next year, this time at a higher level.

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.
I’m course manager Certificate III in Information Technology (Software Applications) which is run through the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN). At OTEN, you can study many IT courses including Cert III level, and some of the modules from the Cert IV and Diploma.

Students who enroll in these modules will probably never come together face-to-face. Actually, this year, we did offer a face-to-face induction for the Diploma students, but very few of them were interested. Remember, these students may be located anywhere in Australia or overseas.

The course is highly flexible—you can start at any time during the year. It is also completely self-paced. As long as you keep meeting the assessment requirements, you can move through as fast as you want.

The course consists of 24 modules. The first 12 modules are offered in the traditional way, print materials which are mailed out. People like print and they like it sent to them. Even if these first modules were on Janison, students would not find it easy to print them all off, because of the way they’re structured. You’d have to go into every section and print it off separately. It would take a lot of time!

Once the student completes their assessment requirements for the paper-based modules, they would notify us and we’d move them on to the next part of the course, which runs online. This second part also has 12 modules, some of which are compulsory, others are electives.

The second, online part of the course is delivered using the Janison platform. Within each module, there are forums that students can participate in. One student might post a comment or question, and others will respond. I’ve found this part of the course quite refreshing, a good form of peer support.
The course facilitator would tend to hold back from these exchanges, to see what develops. If a student posts a query and no-one responds over a week or so, the facilitator may hop in and take part. But more usually it is other students who take part. Amongst the students, there are also a few boffins who get very involved, helping other students through the forum. It's marvellous, and helps us.

We also find the forums useful because they indicate what students are having difficulty with. On the other site students have access to [namely, ols.oten.edu.au], there is a section for answers to Frequently Asked Questions for each module. The forums help us sort out what FAQs to include.

Some people only have work emails, which they can’t use, and some have email addresses through free sites like hotmail.com. They’re not suitable because of restricted memory, and therefore the numbers of emails and sizes of attachments they cater to. Free email sites also attract a lot of junk mail, which means they fill up quickly.

There is no set textbook for the course, although we suggest references. But mostly, they learn from our notes and doing the exercises. Even though we suggest they do these exercises and activities, the student must complete the assessment tasks for each of the modules in the course.

Emails are a huge, time-consuming exercise for us. Particularly at the beginning of the year, email is extremely busy. We have a separate email account for each of our OTEN courses. A student in Cert III will email that account, and it is up to the course manager to go in and respond.

As you could imagine, there can be a lot of duplication of questions and answers. That is why we are putting a lot of effort into setting up a more comprehensive set of answers to Frequently Asked Questions. It will mean when they email in, I can direct them to a forum in Janison or to the FAQs and say: ‘look there first and, if you still can’t figure it out, come back to me.’
Comments on my own learning...

This year, I’ve been doing the FAME course through the Professional Development Network. It has had quite an effect on my thinking about the IT Online courses. Not that it all applies. My situation is very different from most of the other people doing FAME. At OTEN, we’re totally flexible. We can’t give help face-to-face. And we don’t have a ‘group’ of students going through together, because we enroll people right through the year.

However, 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.

One of the things I am going to do is give out a timetable at the start of the year. Even though they don’t have to stick to it, it will at least be a guide to what they should be doing when.

Another thing I’ll do is to exercise more control over students going into the online modules, by only enrolling them in groups, maybe one group every fortnight. Hopefully, each group will see themselves as buddies, and help each other.

Something else I got out of FAME was that this year, I ran their ‘five minutes of FAME’ exercise, where everyone tells everyone else a little about themselves. I thought it was fantastic what eventuated from this! It led to a few peer support groups. As they read the profiles of students over 50, some of the students said ‘I’m over 50, too!’ Out of that, they started a ‘50’s Onliners’ group. Then there was a group at Bateman’s Bay who got in touch through the exercise, and now they have a peer-support meeting every fortnight at a local restaurant.

I also like the way in FAME that everything is highly structured. Every week, on the same day, an email update is sent out, to let you know where things are up to.

I think that’s good. That is also something I’m going to do with my group next year. There are going to be regular announcements. Just like a little prompt, to remind them that I’m still here, that I’m interested.
I’ve been involved in online delivery of programming and software development subjects at TAFE NSW—Sydney Institute since the mid-1990s. Over this long history of delivery, I’ve build up a perspective on what works and what doesn’t. Really, this history is the basis of our current success.

I think there are a number of keys to successfully running a subject online. The way you sell the online option is important. I’ve seen subjects where online delivery is the last option, the one students do when class groups are full. You can imagine the result! The students you get are the ones who are slow to get their name down for face-to-face classes. It can lead to dissatisfaction and high drop-out rates.

We’ve tried to do the opposite with my subjects. The online option is presented as high-status, challenging, for people who are highly self-directed. And there’s a huge motivating factor: by studying online, you cut six months off the time it takes to complete the Diploma. If students don’t want to study the subject online, they can always do it face-to-face and stay enrolled for another six months!

It is also important to provide a very clear structure and guidance right from the start. When students start out, we give them a very good online student guide. That contains all the rules about communication with staff, expectations of participation, and assessment requirements.

At the beginning of the course, each student has to come in and do an orientation session. They learn about things like using TAFE’s online platform, Janison Toolbox. This initial contact is very important. You can immediately see, from the look in their eyes, which students are going to have difficulty working online, so you can take steps to help them.

We’ve found that it is also essential to limit demands on teachers, so that student expectations are realistic and teachers are not overwhelmed. We do a number of things there. For example:

- for material to be considered by the teacher during scheduled online chat sessions, it needs to be received at least 48 hours before the session. We also make sure that queries are dealt with in the order they’re received, which gives an added incentive to submit work early
students are required to include the name of their subject, and the topic of their query, in the subject line of the email. This has a few advantages. It means that the teacher can sort emails into folders without having to open them. It also means that if a number of emails arrive with the same query, the teacher can issue a broadcast email to clarify the issue for everyone.

The social side of learning is also important. Our students know each other, they’ve been in classes together. When they do our online subjects, there are already groups and relationships. It means that, quite naturally, they work together and help each other if they get stuck.

Another important factor is the quality of your online materials. We looked at the existing TAFE materials that were available, but ultimately decided to use existing textbooks for most of the content. We were lucky, because in our face-to-face teaching, we’d been using textbooks which were very clear and didn’t need much extra input from the teacher. We use these same texts with the online group, and it works well. The teaching staff can then concentrate their efforts on mapping, supporting and assessing the learning.

The online version of the programming/software development subjects is completely self-paced. We provide students with a learning map, which lists the criteria they need to satisfy in order to finish. The map also guides them through the text and refers to resources they can download, from Janison Toolbox or elsewhere. We use the online medium to exchange documents with students; to send and receive messages; and for chat sessions. Actually, we haven’t used chat much. Our students are intrinsically motivated, they’re good independent learners, so they don’t need to rely that much on chat.

In running subjects like this, the quality of your teachers is very important. I’ve selected teachers who can work effectively online. Not only are they keen, but they’re oriented to computers and technology. You need that human resource.

For anyone who wants to teach these subjects online, I’ve insisted that they first do the training in using Janison Toolbox. It is run by the technical IT person at the Institute. That’s essential! If the teacher is not confident, it doesn’t work, it just leads to a lot of frustration.
Comments on my own learning...

I've learnt about teaching online from a variety of sources. Back in 1992, I studied online education through University of Technology Sydney. I've also learnt a lot through managing a very large bulletin board, something I've done as a private interest.

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.

I've learnt from negative experiences. I did a distance course some years back, in which assignments were lost, and feedback was very slow. From that, I learnt the value of being organised, and of quick feedback. We've prepared worked answers for a lot of our assessment tasks, so when a student submits something like a spreadsheet, the teacher can easily compare it with the correct one and provide comments.

Looking forward, I don't see courses being run purely online. Total online delivery is doomed to failure. There are lots of barriers to courses being delivered fully online, including equity issues—not everyone has access to a computer. There is also the issue of choice. Online should continue to be one option, rather than the only option.
I teach a course for people who wish to become language interpreters, called Interpreting Preparatory. The subject that I am going to describe, ‘Language Skills for Interpreters’, forms part of the course.

In the regional areas, we can get students in one class who speak many different languages, which has created difficulties in providing adequate support for the Language Skills subject. For that reason, we’ve tried to develop alternate ways of helping students develop their skills in the language other than English.

Even though the way I’m using online approaches is limited at the moment, I am very interested in this area, and believe that there is a lot of potential to use these methods to teach interpreters. To start off with, it was all new, but I’m planning to make a lot more use of online approaches. So far, what we’ve done is develop a website and a pilot CD that can be used to practice interpreting, and we have introduced telephone mentoring from an accredited interpreter. I’ll talk about each of these three approaches.

The website for the course was not developed by me personally. I was able to arrange some funding to employ an expert to get it up and running. The site is accessible via my Institute’s site. We tested it with the students of the course last year, and the feedback was very positive.

The site is currently being revised to make it more user-friendly and to ensure that it can easily be accessed through reader-type software used by the vision impaired. Hopefully, the site will be live in the next few weeks. After that, it will be a constant and ongoing process to keep it up to date.

We also want to keep refining the site. I belong to various associations for interpreters and translators, and I’m constantly receiving news about good resources and links that we can add. Also, as we continue to deliver the course, we will add links to sites that are in languages relevant to the students. Ultimately, my vision is that there will be forums and chat-sessions available but, at the moment, we mainly use it for information and to encourage people to use the internet for their studies.
The course works like this: I start off with a three hour session to introduce the website and how to use it. This is especially important for students who may not have access to a computer or the internet at home. Accessing the site is really up to them, and there is no expectation that everyone will use the site. It is really there for added support if people need it. Many of my students have home computers, but some have to go elsewhere to get online.

My main purpose is to encourage students to explore other sites relating to their language. So the site not only has all the course information, but a lot of links to other language sites. I really want them to look at current information from the country where the language is spoken, so that they can keep up with the development and use of the language. They can read newspapers and other information that will help them with the course and with interpreting in general. Once they start exploring, students often find lots of sites dealing with language and translation, and value the opportunity to explore, as their feedback confirms:

‘The session which gave an introduction to accessing resources on the Internet was very useful and important.’

‘The website has got a huge potential and should be expanded in future. Links to resources such as medical and legal glossaries and government sites are all important for development of terminology.’

‘I consider [your] website a gateway for me to indulge myself!’

At the moment we have links to a range of other language sites, as well as general links to sites that are important to interpreters and translators. I plan to add links to other language sites as more students enroll from different language groups.

Another new element in the course is the use of CDs. Until now, people have used cassettes to practice their interpreting but, to make things more flexible, we decided to develop a CD. The CD has a variety of elements. There are video clips, and other resources which encourage interaction. On a CD, you can stop the clip, take your time to interpret, then restart it, hear the passage being interpreted and, in the process, check whether your understanding is correct. It is a much more realistic situation when you can actually see people rather than just hear them on a cassette tape.

Another approach we’ve tried successfully is to have a system of mentors. My students come from a range of different language backgrounds. It is much better if they have one-on-one support. So we’ve arranged for each student to get 30 minutes of personal tutoring each week. Mentoring happens via telephone, with the tutors based in Sydney and Wollongong. The tutors are accredited and practising interpreters and are matched with a student who speaks the same language. Most of the help provided by the tutors relates to techniques and terminology, although sometimes cultural issues are addressed as well.
The Virtual Library and CD that I described earlier have only been trialled once, but there has been some feedback about the use of the telephone mentoring system. Some students felt that it is wonderful, very helpful and innovative. Others did not really feel it helped them much. I guess the beauty of blended learning is that there are many resources and learning methods that students can choose from and combine to meet their own individual learning needs.

**Comments on my own learning...**

I’ve learnt from a variety of sources, including being a participant in two LearnScope projects. The idea for the Virtual Library really resulted from the first LearnScope project I participated in. There was nothing really specific in the project that I can attribute the idea to, but doing it gave me the opportunity to think about 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 also participated in the NET*Working 2002 conference, which was a fantastic learning experience. I can foresee having chats and forums as part of the learning for the Interpreting course in the future.

The idea for the CD resulted from a practical experience I had. After being involved in administering an external exam for translators, some candidates commented on how difficult it is 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 CD’s seemed the way to go.

I’m really pleased with my idea, although at the moment, we have not been able to get funding to develop it further.
I have been involved in developing a flexible model of study for the Graduate Certificate in Management Communication. This course is designed to meet the needs of people from a wide range of backgrounds working in middle management positions. It covers competencies in subjects such as written and oral communication, interpersonal skills, teambuilding, organisational communication and conflict management. We’ve been running the course in a fairly traditional way, with face-to-face classes, for the last few years, typically with a group of around 15 students.

Over this time, we began to appreciate some of the difficulties that our students face. Many of them are middle-level managers in demanding jobs. They often have families, other commitments and work long hours. So it is a big ask for them to attend campus each week. We were also aware that a number of people interested in the course lived too far away to attend classes regularly.

Mainly because of that, we decided we’d make more use of online learning this year. We wanted to combine weekend workshops, tutorials and online support in a way that met everyone’s needs. Despite the fact that we’ve all put in lots of energy, we have had problems keeping students involved and motivated. We’ve just about burnt ourselves out trying to be supportive and flexible. But let me explain what happened.

For this year’s group, we developed a website incorporating things like chats, forums and the ability to upload and download files. We also received some R&D funding to develop study guides for each module. These explain what the learning outcomes are, the assessment tasks (as far as possible, these are work-related), key concepts, and references to readings. They include some thought-provoking questions to encourage reflection and to get students to respond via the forum.

A guiding design principle was to have multiple options, with as much flexibility as possible. For example, key readings were available on a CD which we gave everyone, but they were also available on the website. Workshops were recommended, but not compulsory. Forums were recommended but, again, not compulsory. And while students were encouraged to visit the website to keep up-to-date with course information, they didn’t have to—we also emailed all announcements directly to them.
So much for our intentions! As you can see, we tried to cater to all the possibilities, and be highly flexible. Now I’ll tell you what actually happened.

To start with, we only had a small group enrolling, with only twelve coming to the first residential. While the residential itself went well, with students expressing great enthusiasm for the course and the website, participation in the online part never really took off.

Lots of the options were not used, or underutilised. For example, forums were not used much, and students quickly lost interest because others were not involved. Similarly, if you did venture into the chat room, you’d find yourself the only one there, a very lonely place. And, in the case of on-campus tutorials, generally only one or two people attended. With face-to-face teaching you can pick up problems quickly, provide lots of feedback and encouragement. Without this interaction we found students dropping out gradually as their own work loads grew.

As this has been happening, we’ve been spending a lot of time thinking about where we went wrong. The whole experience has taught us a lot about what to do (and not do!) when you’re introducing online components into a face-to-face course. So, what do we plan to do differently next time?

The first thing we’d like to do is make sure our teaching staff are properly trained in online facilitation. Even though we were all interested in the possibilities of online, 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.

Next time, we’ll also try to increase the size of the group. We found that online courses don’t work very well with small numbers of students. Next time, we need to promote the course to a larger market.

We are also trying to reduce the number of options. For example, some material will only be available from the website, which will force the students to engage with the site. And we may make it compulsory to participate in forums.

Another thing we realised is that when you teach online, you still need to do what you do in class: push, direct, encourage, inspire. Next time, we won’t be waiting for students to phone us, we’ll be calling them directly to check on progress. And we won’t be waiting for them to find their own learning partners—we’ll be more active in assigning them to groups at the outset.

We’ve also realised that we need to tighten up the teaching effort. That will mean next year, we’ll have fewer facilitators on the course. We’re after a smaller group of staff who work more closely together to integrate subjects.

We need to find ways of rationalising the assessments, and minimising duplication. At present, it’s very bitsy, with lots of modules, and lots of assessment tasks. I think what we’ll end up with are a few carefully designed projects that cover all areas.
And finally, next time we'll make sure we provide enough structure. Instead of being flexible with deadlines, we may need to put more pressure on students earlier in the course. Extending due dates doesn't always help students, as their workload snowballs towards the end of the course.

**Comments on my own learning...**

This whole experience has been a huge learning experience, even though the outcome this year is a disappointment. In some ways, it's a form of 'professional development', and a very valuable one.

Three colleagues and I also did a course called *Teaching and Learning Online*, run by Riverina Institute as part of the Graduate Certificate in Flexible Delivery. 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 had IT qualifications and 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 the Graduate Certificate. It’s a good aim, but perhaps we went too far!

I’m also doing one of the communication modules myself as a learner—‘communications for change management’. This is being run by the Open Training and Education Network (OTEN) for communication teachers around the state. I’m doing it with the idea that, ultimately, I can deliver it myself.

Right now, I’m doing a Masters Degree in Education (Adult) at the University of Technology Sydney—you can do it by distance mode. This course also got me excited about the possibilities of online learning, as online forums have been used successfully for student reflections and sharing information.

I’ve also learnt from the weaknesses of the UTS course. In one subject, the facilitator was involved in the forum at the beginning, but then backed off. It left us all wondering what was going on, and we found it quite frustrating. Obviously, the facilitator needs to stay involved.

I’m very interested in the staff development process. A key challenge is to develop good online facilitation skills. How do you do it? FAME is quite good, but I think you need more than that. You need others to think about it with you, to reflect on lessons face-to-face. So you really need a blended approach to learning online facilitation. You can’t just sit at your computer by yourself and learn to facilitate an online course!
Exemplar 22

Course area: Retail Operations

Nicki Sleeman  nicola.sleeman@tafensw.edu.au  TAFE NSW—New England Institute

This Exemplar gives a clear outline of ingredients that led to a successful program for indigenous school students studying Retail Operations.

I am involved in the delivery of a pilot course (Certificate II in Retail Operations) to a group of Year 11 Indigenous school students studying retail as part of the Higher School Certificate. The students are based in small towns spread across the North West region of NSW. I teach on other retailing courses that are delivered online as well, but I’ll just talk about this one.

These students have just completed a Certificate I in Retail Operations and started Certificate II. All of them have indicated that they would like to sit for their HSC Retail exam. In fact, there is a whole career path to pursue if they wish. If they undertake the remaining two elective modules within the Certificate II, they can then progress to Certificate III. At that point, they may be employed as a Retail Trainee at supervisory level. Next, they can progress to Certificate IV in Retail Management, Diploma in Retail Management and then gain a 50% credit towards a Bachelor of Business at selected Universities. I am hoping that these students will secure either a traineeship or full-time employment at the completion of Year 12.

The pilot course resulted from an enquiry from the Principal of Boggabilla Central School for information about whether we could deliver the HSC Retail Course to a group of indigenous students attending the school. I was able to gain approval for funding, and several other schools joined the program.

There are five main ingredients which have contributed to the success of the course.

Firstly, the learning resources which have been developed and delivered using the Internet. Students access these from their schools, using Internet Explorer. In the initial stages of the course, it was crucial that the schools participating in the course had Internet access. From past experience, I’d learnt that without adequate bandwidth, the process is too slow, resulting in learner frustration.

Secondly, face-to-face sessions have been built into the course each term. The students, mentors and I meet at a central location to reinforce the learning that has occurred online and to conduct assessments.
In planning these sessions, I had to take into account the location of the students and the distances involved. The first face-to-face session was held at Moree, which was about half a day’s travel for all who participated. For some of the students, this was their first trip outside their home towns, so it was very significant for them. They stayed overnight in a caravan park, and had the session with me the next day.

I covered a range of areas, including job-seeking skills; writing job applications on the computer; personal grooming; and interview skills. It was not only of enormous value in preparing students for work experience, but also enhanced the growth of their own personal development!

The second session was at Walgett, a bit further for me but not so far for some of the students! These sessions have proven to be invaluable, in that they nurture group cohesion and provide the ideal opportunity to address any problems that either students or mentors may be experiencing.

Thirdly, I have support people at each school. There is an aboriginal educational assistant, and a [non-indigenous] mentor who supports learning and delivery. Some of the mentors go beyond the call of duty to ensure that students make it to class. For example, they’ll go and pick up students and take them to class if their attendance falters.

The fourth ingredient is weekly teleconferences. Each of the mentors sit in on the class during the teleconference, encouraging discussion by reflecting on personal experiences and providing support. Getting the discussions going wasn’t easy at first—it was like pulling hen’s teeth. However, there has been a dramatic improvement in the student’s oral communication skills.

The final ingredient, which gave my students an opportunity to observe first-hand what they had been learning about, was a fully funded excursion to Brisbane. We visited and examined operations at the major shopping and distribution centres. It was just fantastic, one of the best student excursions I’ve been involved in! Given that many of the students had not travelled before, they coped remarkably. From the start, I used the excursion as a carrot: “If you get through the first three terms, you will be rewarded with a an excursion to Brisbane”!

It is important to give the students feedback on their online activities as soon as possible, so that they feel motivated to continue. This also helps you know if students are experiencing any technological problems or whether they may need some extra tutorial support. If they miss a few classes or stop participating, I also ring them at home. Doing so gives me an opportunity to speak to them on a one-to-one basis. By doing this, students realise that you really do care about them!

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I am really fortunate in that if any technical problems occur, I have some very good support. Usually problems are rectified within half an hour of notification.
A second key is the on-the-ground support, the aboriginal educational assistant and the mentor.

A good course induction is essential. I visited several of the schools at the end of last year to show staff and students what the course would entail. In addition, a teleconference was held at the beginning of the year, to walk students and mentors through all the processes involved in blended learning.

Finally, you need adequate funds. Teleconferencing is expensive, so are the mentors and assistants, and then there is the cost of my teaching hours. Trying to cut costs will, in my opinion, reduce retention rates and result in inferior outcomes. I strongly believe that if a pilot course such as this is a success and accommodates the needs of isolated students, there should be an exhaustive search for additional funding to keep it going.

Comments on my own learning...

In terms of my own development, I’ve learnt a lot over the years about teaching online. Actually, some of the most valuable lessons have come from poorly managed learning experiences. I have completed a Bachelor of Teaching, a Grad Dip in Retail and Wholesale, and am now undertaking a Masters in Marketing, all by distance. Like many of us who have studied using distance education, I’ve experienced many frustrations.

I also undertook the FAMe course last year. When I commenced FAMe, I was eager to learn—it seemed a timely opportunity to increase my knowledge of online development and delivery. However, in doing the course, I felt that there should have been more information about particular topics, and more structure.

Overall, most of my learning about online has come from practical experience, from trial and error. I’m continually involved in developing online materials and running courses like the one I’ve been describing. Our Institute strives for quality improvement, and encourages teachers like myself to develop and deliver better educational programs.