Blended Learning

LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE
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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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* (this booklet): Suggestions for dealing with the challenges you’ll face when you combine online and face-to-face approaches.

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

Booklet 4  *Glossary of terms and courses*.

Interviewees’ suggestions dealt with a wide range of areas. For example, there were quite a few suggestions about how to run an orientation session for a blended course, how to motivate online learners, and how to avoid getting flooded by student emails when you’re conducting parts of a course online.

Suggestions like these are summarised in this booklet. In the space available, it wasn’t possible to record every suggestion, but an effort was made to include the key points. Where it seems useful, the Exemplar number is also cited, in case you want to read more about what happened in booklet 3.
How do I start using computers and the internet in my teaching?

The prospect of introducing an online component into your teaching can seem quite daunting. Even teachers who have computer skills that are adequate for word processing and emailing find that they have a lot to learn when they start teaching online.

So, where do you start? The first thing to do is to sort out your expectations, and write them down. Your expectations will relate to why you want to introduce computers and the internet into your class, for example:

- the availability of interesting resources online
- improved cost-effectiveness (not only for program providers, but for students) that may result from going online
- the hope that going online will help students overcome fears about computers and develop a range of new skills
- the wish to conduct classes that are more self-paced and self-directed, with you in the role of facilitator
- the expectation that online delivery will increase flexibility for you and your students.

Whatever your reasons, the main point is to try and get clear about what you expect out of using computers and the internet in your teaching. One way to approach this is to imagine that, after going online, you were to have your course formally evaluated. Write a few sentences that sum up what you hope the evaluator would find. For example:

Students have become more confident in the use of computers and the internet during the semester.

More capable students have been able to move ahead at their own pace, leaving me with more time to focus on students who are having difficulties.

Students regularly go to the website and contribute to things like the forum.

Clear expectations like this will give you a good basis for planning what you do and for monitoring your progress.
The second suggestion for starting is to just start somewhere, and keep what you do simple. You could start with any of the following:

- during class-time, get students to download and use information from a CD or website
- ask students to locate the best website for a particular topic and post the address to a forum before they come back to class next week
- make existing resources, such as an ANTA Toolbox or information provided by a textbook publisher, available on CD as background material, and set tasks that require use of this material
- get help to create your own simple website which includes basic information that students will need to refer to, and has links to information-rich sites
- ensure that students have your, and each other’s, email addresses
- use group tasks that require discussion between classes, either by email or, preferably, using the chat facility available on a number of sites (see Exemplar 9 for some of the possibilities).

A third suggestion for getting started is, no matter how modest your plans, try to introduce the online approaches it in an orderly way that gives students plenty of notice and explains your expectations clearly. The previous suggestion to ‘start somewhere’ does not imply you should walk into class, midway through a semester, and announce that you are suddenly taking a different tack. Where students are not informed well ahead of time, there can often be negative consequences (as happens in Exemplar 1, for example).

A fourth aspect of getting started is to experience being an online learner yourself. As one interviewee observed:

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

You can get experience either as part of a formal course in facilitating online learning, or by enrolling as a pseudo-student in a course one of your colleagues is running (see Exemplar 6). For more about formal courses that will help you with blended learning, as well as other ways of gaining first-hand experience, see Booklet 1 (Learning New Skills in Blending).
How do I plan the orientation session?

Many online courses start with a face-to-face orientation session, typically lasting for a few hours or a day. For students studying mainly online, there is real value in bringing everyone together. As one teacher observed:

‘You can immediately see, from the look in their eyes, which students are going to have difficulty working online, and take steps to help them.’

The orientation session usually involves talk about what is required, followed by some work directly on computer. It may also be an important social occasion and, in some courses, the only opportunity for students to meet face-to-face:

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

If your students are not used to computers, it may help to do some online work with them as a group.

‘With my students, working on the first few modules together 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.’

More confident and capable students should be able to work more independently. You, as the teacher, can move around helping individuals or, to take things one step further, can go to your office and interact with them online.

Depending on the course and the students involved, orientations typically cover such things as:

- getting organised and managing your time
- using the online platform, such as Janison Toolbox
- arranging access to email, and using emails
- security issues such as the need to keep PIN numbers private
- standards of behaviour that apply when you email people and engage in chats
- practice in using such things as forums and chats

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1 Even though you can arrange email addresses through many free sites, these may not be very suitable because they often have restrictions on how many emails you can retain, and on the size of attachments. Free email sites also attract a lot of junk mail.
■ putting people into groups and, if there are to be specific group tasks, nominating someone as the group co-ordinator (one role of this person might be to co-ordinate submitting group assignments and emails to the teacher).

An important aspect of the orientation is to ‘sell’ online learning. After all, it’s an opportunity to develop new skills, it’s very flexible, it will allow participants to work with some stimulating materials. Hopefully, it will be fun!

Some modules have a lot of content. Given the way some modules are structured, and the limitations of home computers, it can take students a long time to download and print the necessary material. You can help by distributing paper copies during the orientation.

You may also have CDs to distribute. These can contain modular material, learning materials based around textbooks, references, or software such as Acrobat Reader that students will require.

If you’re running a course across a large geographical area, everyone doesn’t need to come to the same location for the orientation (although it is better if they can). Alternatives include:

■ running several orientations in parallel, at different centres, with the help of onsite facilitators

■ using teleconferencing to walk people (students and, if necessary, facilitators) through the materials

As well as the face-to-face orientation, it is useful to build orienting information into each module. Modules which do this typically include such things as:

■ getting your computer set up with the right software

■ getting connected online, and opening the browser

■ how the module is structured

■ basic skills such as moving around the module, selecting and opening items.
How do I take student characteristics into account?

Learners vary a lot. Reading through the Exemplars, you’ll see that some of the learners described have never used computers:

‘Some of my students freaked out at the mention of computers!’

Of course, ‘freaking out’ is only one of a range of reactions. Some students, with little or no computer experience, are still confident and eager:

‘In going online, we were immediately confronted by the different levels of our students, some of whom were very quick to complete the tasks [but then] quickly became frustrated’.

And then there are large numbers of learners who have some, and perhaps a lot, of knowledge of computers:

‘Our students [studying programming/software development] are intrinsically motivated. They’re good, independent learners, so they don’t need to rely that much on chat.’

Apart from the issue of familiarity and confidence with computers, learners vary in other important ways. The Exemplars include:

- middle level managers working long hours in demanding jobs [Exemplar 21]
- middle-aged women returning to the workforce [Exemplars 4, 5, 6 and 7]
- young students who may have behavioural or other problems [Exemplar 13]
- learners who may be living and working at remote locations [Exemplars 14 and 16]
So how do you cater to such differences? The Exemplars illustrate a variety of ways:

■ at the beginning of the course, try not to rely on your own assumptions about what students know. You can, of course, survey them to find out how they rate their computer skills but, better still, get them to do a few tasks which actually test their skill levels—for example, sending you an email

■ for students who are not confident with computers, allow plenty of time to work face-to-face until they’ve picked up the basics. Also, encourage students to work together in small groups with a computer, so they can help each other if they get stuck

■ ensure that materials are designed in a flexible way to accommodate different student groups. Well-designed modules allow the teacher to tailor assessment tasks and timing to the group. You may also want to make sure that, for people who don’t have computer skills or computer access, alternatives are available such as mailing in hard copies of assignments

■ build in tasks and options that cater to different learning styles. For example, you may include both chats and formal written tasks such as keeping a journal. The first suits people who like informal discussion, whereas the second is better for people who like time to reflect.

However, a word of caution. As illustrated in Exemplar 21, you can go too far with flexibility. The teachers in this example came to feel that they had built in too many options:

‘We’ve just about burnt ourselves out trying to be flexible. Lots of the options [we provided] were not used. 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. Next time, we will definitely reduce the number of options.’

So you need to think hard about flexibility. When is it appropriate to be flexible and open, to have multiple options, to leave things up to students to decide? And when do students need clear, definite guidelines and requirements to do certain things?

It isn’t possible to be too prescriptive here—your reasons for combining online and face-to-face, and the materials themselves, will largely determine how you structure the learning experience.

Nevertheless, it’s fair to say that the focus of the more successful programs described in the Exemplars seems to be on integration (everything complements everything else, to form a neat whole) rather than on providing multiple options (where there can be too much duplication, and too many choices).
How do I avoid being flooded by emails and assessable work?

One of the concerns of many teachers introducing online into their teaching is that they will get overwhelmed by emails and assessable work flowing 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To take the example of email, won’t students be sending you emails at all hours, and expecting a response by the next morning? Won’t you get floods of emails in busy periods?

The answer to both questions is that it can happen if you let it:

‘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.’

‘Emails are a huge, time-consuming exercise for us. Particularly at the beginning of the year, email is extremely busy’.

There are a number of ways to avoid getting overwhelmed by emails. Firstly, establish clear guidelines about turnaround times when you set up the course. Ideally, these guidelines will be included in written notes that you provide at the orientation session. A realistic turnaround time for emails might be 48 hours, which means that part-time teachers would be expected to check for emails from students three times a week.

Secondly, try to have a part of the online module you’re using devoted to ‘frequently asked questions’ (or FAQs). After all, many questions are repeated by a number of students, so why not provide a thorough answer that everyone has access to?

A variation on this theme is to post your answers to important queries onto the course forum. Not only does that mean everyone can read your answer, but they can respond and elaborate as well.

Thirdly, as advocated in Exemplar 4, you can divide your class into groups, and nominate a group leader to co-ordinate email queries:

‘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.’
Fourthly, as suggested in Exemplar 19, it helps to give students very specific guidelines about what is included in the ‘subject’ section of the email. If they are required to include the name of their subject, and the essence of their query, this means that the teacher can sort emails into subject- or query-specific folders without having to open them. If a number of emails arrive with the same query, the teacher can quickly issue a broadcast email to clarify things for everyone.

Regarding assessable work, you face the same kinds of challenges—how do you manage student expectations and avoid getting overwhelmed by bits of work coming at you from all directions?

Certainly, it helps to have clear guidelines. They should spell out what has to be presented by when, and your likely turnaround time.

The nature of the assessment tasks is also important. In some modules, assessment exercises are very bitsy, with lots of little assessment tasks. From the point of view of running the module without getting overwhelmed with marking, it is much better to have a few carefully designed projects that cover all areas. So, if you have scope to do so, find ways of simplifying assessments.

Where assessable work is submitted via an online forum, it may be wise to identify at the start which tasks you will comment on. For the rest, only provide feedback if it is asked for by students. Whether this advice is appropriate will depend on the subject and student expectations. In some cases, it may be important to keep in close contact with students and respond to all work, as occurs in Exemplar 22.

And finally, remember that fears about 24–7 demands by students work the other way around as well. Students themselves may be feeling anxious about your unrealistic expectations for quick response. The moral here is to establish realistic assessment and work requirements early in the course, stick to them, and resist the temptation to issue additional demands at short notice.
How do I stay in control of what happens?

The prospect of moving part or all the way from face-to-face to online can introduce concerns that things will get out of hand, with your students wondering off into the ether and never working as a group. And, as Exemplar 2 illustrates, it can sometimes feel like that:

‘The online module feels like a big void. Right now [mid-way through the module], it is not clear how my students are progressing. For example, we came across a student yesterday who hadn’t even started his assessment, because he didn’t know where to start. We’ve only heard from three students—the rest are a worry.’

The issue of staying in control doesn’t only apply to modules like this that are done at a distance. You may be doing some online work in a classroom setting, only to have some students race ahead and then feel confused about what to do next, while other students struggle with the basics. Given the range of students in many classes, how to you stay in control?

There are a number of things you can do to prevent things getting out of hand. These include:

■ being clear, right from the start of the course or module, about your expectations:

‘When students start out, we give them a very good online student guide that contains all the rules about communication with staff and expectations of participation.’

Exemplar 1 illustrates what can go wrong if information about an online course is not made clear at the outset:

‘We failed to let our evening students know, when they enrolled, 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.’

■ letting students know exactly what the activity requirements are:

‘Our course information says: ‘This week, you need to do X’. I also tried to be realistic. I never had more than three activities for each learning outcome—for example, ‘send me an email and post comments on a forum’.
■ providing a definite structure (although, of course, the amount of structure will depend on the level of students and the subject matter). Where students are working independently online in the classroom, you can still apply some structure:

‘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. You need a definite structure... 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”.’

■ keeping an eye on student participation, and getting in touch with anyone who seems to be dropping out:

‘I use [the module platform] 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’ve disappeared into cyberspace. You need to intervene before that happens. Regular contact is essential!’

In some classes, there are also ‘control’ challenges related to how students use the internet or what they post in forums and chats. Exemplar 13 describes a situation where this was an issue, and recommends online moderation:

‘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.’
How do I use online resources effectively?

Blended learning is like cooking. An important challenge is to mix the various resources to best effect. Some resources are already in existence when a course gets underway, such as online modules or materials developed by TAFE NSW, ANTA, public internet sites, or textbook publishers.

Other resources only come into being as a result of an exchange. Take the example of forums. A student posts a question, which results in responses by several students and the teacher. In this case, the ‘resource’ that results is evolving and interactive.

Let’s consider some of the challenges for teachers in making effective use of resources. One is the issue of whether to use pre-existing material, or to create your own. Certainly, there is lots of material already available. Many teachers find that ANTA Toolboxes (particularly the more recent ones) and learningware produced by TAFE NSW are very useful. You can base your whole course on such material, or use it for background reference.

Another valuable resource may be material that supports textbooks. Publishers are increasingly providing supplementary material online or on CDs:

‘We’ve been fortunate, in that the textbooks we prefer to use come 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 some cases however, no suitable resources are available. As described in Exemplar 11, which deals with training for florists, producing your own can be a highly creative exercise:

‘What I did was to go and take digital photographs of hundreds of 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.’

Another challenge is to decide how you want to use the internet. In some online courses, the internet is a core resource. For example, Exemplar 14 describes students using the internet to draw on the expertise of people around the world for help in researching family history. Exemplar 20 is about encouraging students to explore sites dealing with foreign languages and translation.
At the same time, there are challenges in encouraging students to search public internet sites. Aside from the obvious one of keeping students focused when so many distractions are available online, there is also the challenge of validating the information found:

‘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.’

Of course, an increasingly important skill in the internet age is for students to be able to judge the value of different information. As suggested in Exemplar 16, all students need help to learn how to locate, use and assess the value of online information.

It can also be challenging to keep online resources up to date. Exemplar 10 describes how this is done in quarry management. Managers in this industry need to keep up to date with a lot of technical and legislative information which keeps changing:

‘Our course website contains hyperlinks to material like legislation and technical information. 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.’

The example of quarry management also illustrates how it is possible to tap into the knowledge that is out there in the industry:

‘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 it to us and, if it is tricky, we can send it on to the Institute of Quarrying, who will open it up for comment by members. A query like this might get 20 or 30 replies. It is as if the learner has access to 2000 teachers! A very, very rich resource.’
How do I motivate and support learners?

The principles of motivating and supporting learners who are working in an online environment are really no different from those that apply in the classroom.

One important issue is to know when to be directive. While online learning is associated with flexibility and self-direction, there are also times when you need to be very assertive and take the initiative:

‘We’ve realised 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 assign them to groups at the outset.’

It is also important to be involved. In the classroom, if the teacher drifts off and conveys ‘lack of interest’, students will be quick to pick that up. Teaching online is no different. Clearly, in terms of motivation and support, it is better to take the initiative and let students know you’re interested and ready to help, rather than sitting back and waiting for students to chase you:

‘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.’

It is very evident from the Exemplars that when it is done well, online teaching is not an easy or time-saving option. For example, several Exemplars illustrate that forums and chats won’t run by themselves—at the very least, you need to participate enough to let everyone know that you’re a mindful observer, there in the background, keeping an eye on everything.

Most students want to be known, liked, respected, and made to feel part of the group. The challenge is how to meet such human needs when some of your teaching is happening online.

Part of the answer lies in the face-to-face component of your blended program. At the very least, there should be opportunities for students to meet and socialise a few times per year, including an orientation session at the start of the module or course (for more details, see Planning the Orientation Session). If your course is run in remote locations, and involves people with limited computer skills, you may also want to arrange local mentoring support for students, to keep up their levels of motivation.
But, as the Exemplars illustrate, you can also do a lot to meet people’s social needs online:

‘At the end of the course, we had an online ‘party’. We each posted our photos onto the forum, which was fun.’

It is also motivating to help people deal with problems or challenges they face. For example:

- learning new skills in searching for information online means that evening students can make much better use of their (limited) time [Exemplar 6]
- selling the online option as a ‘high status, challenging’ alternative which provides the opportunity to graduate more quickly [Exemplar 19]
- providing individual mentoring for students, in their own language, over the telephone each week helps them practice their skills and deal with cultural issues and uncertainties [Exemplar 20]

Feedback, and taking the initiative to make personal contact, is also very motivating:

‘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!’

And finally, people like to be rewarded. Something that everyone values and can look forward to, as described in Exemplar 22, can be extremely motivating:

‘The final ingredient, which gave my [Retail Operations] 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! 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”!’
How do I get learners to work as a group?

One of the great advantages of blended learning, in contrast with pure online, is that students have an opportunity to meet and get to know each other. In some of the Exemplars, students are doing traditional face-to-face subjects in parallel with blended or online subjects. Inevitably, relationships carry over:

‘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.’

In other Exemplars, students meet for the first time at the orientation or some other point early in the course. If well structured, these meetings can provide a good basis for relationship-building:

‘People in our industry have often 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.’

But even when students do not meet face-to-face early on, you can still do a lot to build relationships within the group:

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

In several of the Exemplars, it is clear that relationships such as this that formed early in the course were then the basis for groups of students working together and helping each other:

‘I ran an exercise where everyone tells everyone else a little about themselves online. I thought it was fantastic what eventuated from this! It led to a few peer support groups [amongst people with common backgrounds].’

You can and, when appropriate, should play an active role in getting such groups started. The Exemplars illustrate a number of ways to do so:

- even when, as in the case of OTEN, it is possible to enroll students individually, it may be preferable to enroll them in groups, perhaps one group every few weeks, and encourage them to see themselves as peers and allies

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2 This activity was inspired by an exercise which is part of Professional Development Network’s FAMe program.

3 OTEN is the open training and education network of TAFE NSW.
- during the orientation, have people work on exercises in pairs
- nominate project groups, and get them to decide on their own team leader (responsibilities might include pulling together answers to a discussion topic; submitting group project work; liaising with the teacher when there are common queries; and general group maintenance tasks such as chasing up non-contributors)
- ensure that participants have each other’s email addresses.

You can also use forums to shift the focus from yourself and the course materials as the source of knowledge, to students as an important source of knowledge.

For example, suppose a student emails you with a query that is relevant to others in the group. Instead of replying immediately, you can post the query on the forum, and invite students to reply. After all, some students may have considerable insight and knowledge. It’s good for them and you if they can share what they know:

‘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.’

‘Amongst the students, there are a few boffins who get very involved, helping other students through the forum. It’s marvellous, and helps us.’

The issue raised here is really when to intervene, and when to wait to see whether the group can deal with an issue themselves:

‘My subject is one where there are often a lot of questions. 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.’

Chats are another way to foster group work. The term ‘chat’ is a misnomer, in that it suggests something casual and light. In contrast, the best chats are focused, and an effective form of dialogue.

The Exemplars show that teachers are having mixed success with chats. A range of factors, from the group size, to whether students have keyboards skills, to their work commitments and availability, and their level of motivation, all impact on the success of chat sessions. While a number of these factors are outside your control, there are some things you can do to make chats work:

- at the beginning of the module, let students know that chats are an integral part of the course
- agree on a definite time for chat sessions, ensuring that it accommodates as many participants as possible
- provide a focus for the chat—a topic to consider, an issue to resolve
- don’t overdo the number or duration of chats—as noted in Exemplar 1, it is better to have less chats (perhaps one every two or three weeks) but to put more effort into promoting the ones that are conducted.
How do I build in the face-to-face component?

Once an online module or course gets underway, and following the orientation session, there are a number of ways of building a face-to-face component into your classes.

While knowledge areas are well-handled online, face-to-face sessions are a good place to deal with attitudes and hands-on skills. For example, in Exemplar 4, the theory relating to medications and the legal side of injections is first covered online, and then there are face-to-face demonstrations of how to give an injection, along with student assessments.

One way of bringing students together is at a residential. In many cases, the students come on campus during the residential, but sometimes, residentials are held where the students are, with teachers travelling to work with them:

‘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. The first face-to-face session was held at Moree… For some of the students, this was their first trip outside their home towns, so it was very significant. They stayed overnight in a caravan park, and had the session with me the next day.’

Tutorials are another way that teachers supplement online learning with a face-to-face component. Typically, a teacher will organise a time where students can come and see him or her, or arrange for students to work in a learning centre with assistance from a tutor.

Videoconferencing is yet another way of conducting face-to-face. Unfortunately, a number of factors are limiting the use of videoconferencing at the moment, including high cost, and lack of access and equipment in particular locations. However, the impact of factors like these is likely to diminish as transmission channels improve. Already, a number of the teachers interviewed in this project are assessing the use of videoconference or waiting for prices to drop.

In addition to residentials, tutorials, and videoconferencing, there are a number of other ways of building a face-to-face component into a course, including:

- directing students to attend seminars run by the industry
- arranging for workplace demonstrations by a certified mentor
■ requiring participation in formal courses such as Frontline Management
■ arranging for work in other industry sectors, or with suppliers or contractors.

Finally, assessments are another way of building in face-to-face; for example:
■ assessments of practical skills in areas such as nursing [Exemplar 4]
■ assessments linked with legislative requirements in areas such as occupational health and safety [Exemplar 1].
How can I build more support for online learning?

In traditional classrooms, the teacher has a monopoly on knowledge and skills. The widely used term ‘delivery’ reflects this—the teacher has the knowledge, and is responsible for ‘delivering’ it to students.

Online learning represents a big cultural shift. It gives much more of the responsibility for learning to students. You, the teacher, are placed into a more facilitative role, with students free to learn from a variety of sources, and to exercise more control over how and when they learn.

Clearly, many classrooms contain a mix of the traditional ‘delivery’ approach and the emerging ‘self-directed, empowered’ approach. Many of the Exemplars describe teachers using online learning to gradually move towards self-direction and empowerment. But in doing so, one can meet considerable resistance:

‘When I moved to [my present organisation], it was quite a culture shock. There is a general tendency [here] 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.’

Attitudes like these can come from a variety of sources, including management and other teachers. As reported by Melissa Mills4 (Exemplar 15), the uncertainties associated with online learning take a variety of forms. As expressed by teaching staff:

‘We must make sure that we don’t replace face-to-face teaching with technology.’

‘We can’t make time to learn unless we go to a classroom.

‘Other work commitments interfere with “anyplace, anytime” learning.’

Faced with this kind of resistance, what can teachers do to create a culture that is supportive of online learning? One of the key strategies relates to professional development. Resistance can result from uncertainty which may, in turn, be the result of gaps in skills and knowledge—for example, in:

- using computers
- using online software and platforms

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■ using the internet and search engines
■ applying classroom principles to teaching online
■ general online facilitation.

One way of reducing resistance is to encourage staff to do a course in online learning that involves learning online themselves. This advice applies to senior and middle-level managers just as much as to teachers. Consistent with the focus of these materials, the best approach may be a blended one:

‘How do you develop good facilitation skills? 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. You can’t just sit at your computer by yourself and learn to facilitate an online course! So you really need a blended approach to learning online facilitation.’

Other strategies used successfully in the Exemplars to get people on board and encourage attitude change include:

■ rather than having a large staff with varying attitudes to online, it is better to run a course with a few staff who are committed to trying out online approaches:

‘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.’

■ selling the advantages of blending in some online, such as flexibility for both students and teaching staff, equity, and accessibility

■ coaching tutors, mentors, and part-time staff who are expected to support the blended course, so that they understand the principles and are well-equipped to anticipate the kinds of issues likely to arise.
How do I ensure access and technical support?

If a blended approach is going to work, you need to make sure students can get access to online materials. Some students who are expected to work from home may never have used computers or the internet before:

‘I’ve realised that a few of my students are still struggling with the basics, like getting onto the [course] site. Next time, I’ll hand out some simple, step-by-step notes covering things like logging on and moving around the site in the introductory session.’

‘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!’

Even if they can use computers, there may be access challenges, particularly if students are studying at a rural centre:

‘You 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. Hopefully this whole area will improve, but access speed is a big issue in all rural areas.’

While many access issues go well beyond what you, as an individual teacher, can do, it helps to understand the basic access challenges, and to ask yourself questions such as:

■ how are your students going to use computers—in the classroom, in the library, from home or work? And, in each case, are they relying on modem access or are they using (the much faster) broadband access?

‘One reason that the ANTA Toolbox was not well received initially [was that] at the time, we didn’t have proper space with access to computers, something we’ve now arranged with the help of the library.’

■ if students have only limited access, is it appropriate to provide hard copies of material so that they won’t have to download and print at home?

■ will students or staff face difficulties because of institutional firewalls?

‘Some of the people I’ve been networking with have tried to do it from a TAFE computer system, but that can present problems. There are strong firewalls, so you may not be able to upload the chat. It also means that the teacher in a TAFE setting can’t always see what the student sees.’
if students are working from home, will you also need to talk with them while they’re online? (The fact that many students will only have one phone-line can limit the scope for online tutorial support at a distance.)

Many of the Exemplars deal with students who’ve only got limited computer skills. As a result, they can sometimes run into access and technical problems. It helps if you can organise on-call technical support.

Like students, staff may have had very little exposure to computers. The sudden expectation of doing some of the teaching online can be very threatening. Technical support staff can play a vital role in helping teachers get over their anxieties and learn the necessary skills:

‘The Institute’s online facilitator [has] 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 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.’

Several of the Exemplars also acknowledge the important role that can be played by library staff, and the value of letting library staff know about online courses and their requirements:

‘We've had a lot of help from our library, to help students access the computers. In return, we try to keep the library informed. For example, we’ve registered the library as a proxy student, so they get copies of our newsletter and other announcements. If they’re better informed, it helps them guide students through things like library searches.’