

## FROM ONLINE LEARNER TO ONLINE TEACHER

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*The experience as an online student is discussed as a case study. The six-month online course undertaken was designed as professional development for teachers. The objective of the course was to develop skills in online development and delivery of training. It included instructional design, the development of educational models for delivery, tutoring online and the use of computer mediated communications software. The positive and negative aspects of this experience are covered. The "lessons learned" are discussed for relevance to teaching health statistics, predominantly risks and rates and common study types used in health investigations.*

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this case study is to examine some of the lessons learned from the experience as an online learner, for relevance to teaching statistics online in the future. In particular, the issues were examined for relevance to teaching health statistics in graduate programs at Swinburne University of Technology, Victoria, Australia. Health statistics is currently taught at Swinburne on-campus (<http://www.swin.edu.au/statistics>). The option of online delivery in the future has the potential to:

- Offer more interactive content;
- Reach broader audiences, including international students;
- Increase collaboration with other students and teachers;
- Reduce travel time for students and teachers;
- Develop other skills sought by future employers, such as adaptability; and
- Allow students the flexibility to study in their own environment at their own pace

The information in this case study was sourced from journal notes made over the duration of the course, course assessments which included reflective writing and research and contributions made to online discussions during the course.

### BACKGROUND

The *Online Professional Development* course was first developed in 1997 after some teaching staff at the Northern Melbourne Institute of Technical and Further Education studied online the previous year (Aspin, 1998). Their experiences suggested that any professional development for teachers in online teaching needed to bring potential deliverers in direct contact with the online learner's experience. They concluded that the most effective way to understand the needs of the online learner was to be one. This thought was captured in a comment made by a teacher in an early online discussion: "...what teachers don't realise is that by becoming a student again they will become better teachers..."

Therefore the course was developed with two objectives – to:

- Teach about online development and delivery; and
- Be taught by online delivery methods.

The author undertook the course in April – October 2001 with approximately 9 other students, all of who were teachers. Most students and course tutors were located in various parts of Australia, with one student in Japan and one tutor in New Zealand.

### ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE

The *Online Professional Development* course was based on the software platform, FirstClass and consisted of:

- Real time (synchronous) online tutorials
- Threaded email discussion on designated topics
- Real time (synchronous) discussions with other students and mentors
- Website (resources, information about tutors, showcase of student work)

- Online repository (tutorial transcripts, study guide, topic notes, resources)
- Electronic lodgment of assessments
- CD of software and graphics files

The main topics covered in the course were changes in the education sector, understanding online learners, teaching styles, educational models, online instructional design and an elective (marketing, management of online courses, online communication tools or “plug-in” software). Further detailed information about the course is available at: <http://online.nmit.vic.edu.au/nopd>. Importantly, the course was centrally about pedagogical change – not learning a new software or web development (The On-line Flexible Delivery Team, 2000).

**ONLINE LEARNING - A NEW ENVIRONMENT**

There is little doubt that online learning is a new environment – and quite a confronting one at first. During an early tutorial in the *Online Professional Development* course, students (who were teachers) were asked to describe their feelings about the new online environment. Some of the responses were: "... mild panic! ... loss of equipoise ... fear of failure ... out of control ... not confident ... not sure how it all works ... unsure of the technology ... a sense of overwhelmingness ..."

Aside from unfamiliarity with technology, most of the comments reflect the change in the traditional teaching model from teacher-centred to student-driven. In an online environment, the teacher is more akin to a facilitator and the student is more in control of the direction of their own learning. There is also an opportunity to utilise many expert teachers, including those geographically dispersed (Booker, 2000). There were approximately six tutors who taught the diverse range of topics in the *Online Professional Development* course. The traditional teaching environment is represented in Figure 1. Compare it with an online environment (as experienced in the *Online Professional Development* course as an example), represented in Figure 2.

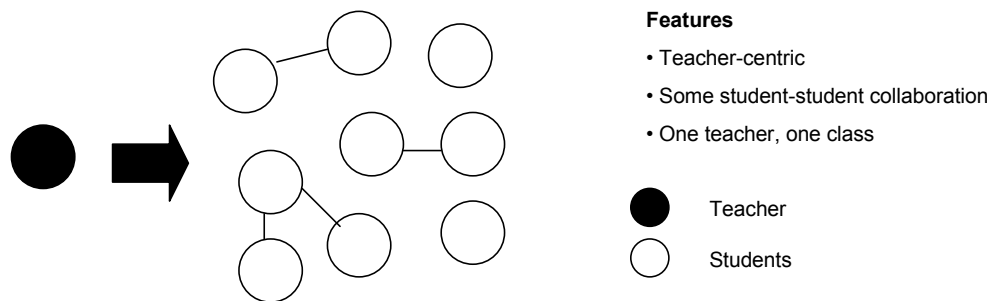


Figure 1. A Representation of the Traditional Teaching Environment

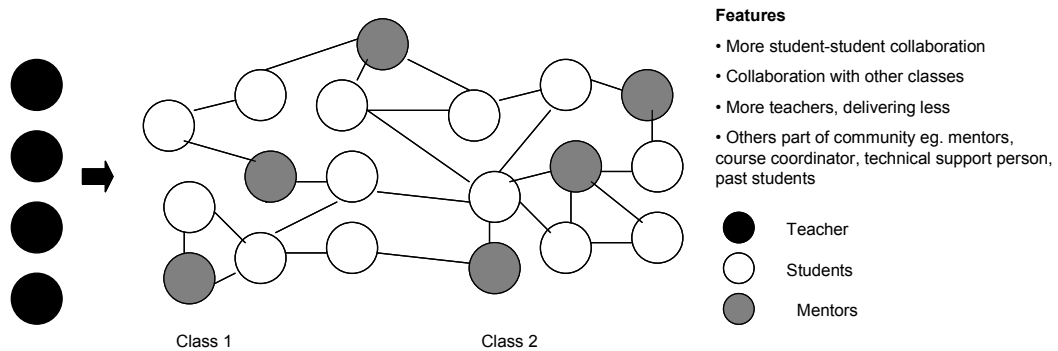


Figure 2. A Representation of an Online Learning Environment

Within this environment the learning in the *Online Professional Development* course was divided into two categories. The first category was learning the actual content of the course. This involved weekly online tutorials for the first three months as a stimulus to each topic. Students then followed up each topic in detail for assessment. These assessment tasks included: research,

reports on online learning models, the development of an educational model scoping a potential online course and an elective product (eg. an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for marketing an online course).

The second part of the learning was probably the most interesting and also unique to online learning. It consisted of regular participation in the online community such as reading postings (eg. on references, conferences, past tutorials), sending emails, adding comments to threaded discussions and building a website. Initially this participation was overwhelming because the community was made up of a vast number of anonymous participants. In addition to those in your “class”, people contributing were: past students, students in other classes, mentors, tutors and staff at the teaching institution such as the technical support person. Assessment tasks included participation in online discussions, attendance at online tutorials and preparing and delivering a “mock” online tutorial. This aspect of the course was one of the most rewarding, reflected in the following comment made by one student: “... *online community is just that ... a community you can bond into a cohesive group ... if you put out, you get back ... great freedom of participation ...*”

The author agrees with this sense of “belonging” in the learning community despite never actually having met any of the participants face to face. This was mostly attributed to the encouraging language and symbols (eg. smiling face, clapping) used by everyone in online discussions and the involvement of mentors.

#### OVERVIEW OF POSITIVES

There were two outstanding positives of the *Online Professional Development* course in the author’s view. These were the:

- Opportunities arising from a broader community environment (rather than a single class); and
- Support model used to facilitate course completion.

With respect to the broader online community, the technology made it possible to involve many geographically dispersed people in the community. There were many tutors involved in delivering the course content, which spanned many varied topics. All tutors had very enthusiastic attitudes, perhaps partly because they were sharing the teaching responsibility. Activities such as online tutorials were open to any students and others in the community so it was always interesting to “meet” new people and hear a diverse range of opinions. Also integral to the community was information beyond the actual course content such as reference material, conference details and job announcements. This sort of information provided a useful context to the actual topic material and gave some perspective on actually applying the course content.

The second positive experience with the *Online Professional Development* course was the support model used. There were several useful support mechanisms made available to students in the course. These included:

- Allocation of a mentor;
- A comprehensive induction (lasting one month);
- Study guide including recommended approach & learning contract;
- Website of resources including a showcase of past student work;
- Course coordinator;
- Several tutors, each expert in different topics and supporting topic notes;
- Interaction with other students; and
- Dedicated technical support.

Of these support mechanisms, the mentor was by far the most valuable, followed by the induction period and the study guide. Interestingly, aside from the mentor, the other two are the ones that probably require the least ongoing human resources.

#### IMPORTANCE OF THE MENTOR

The role of the mentor in the *Online Professional Development* course is best explained in the following extract from the first email the author received from her mentor:

*... having completed your induction process, you get "handed over" to me ... I'm the person who assesses you, and in general, it's my job to be there in any capacity you may need to assist your learning experience in this course... learning in this environment is really totally different to other kinds of learning ... the other really important thing is to get involved in this community of learners ... share a piece of information, interesting web site, some insight you had or even a personal reflection ... establishing this sense of shared experience helps to remind you that even though you can't see us we are all in here ...*

Each student was allocated a mentor at the start of the course. All mentors were past students of the course. The frequency and type of contact was negotiable between the individual and student. The author contacted her mentor via email only on approximately 15 occasions during the six-month course. Mentors were described by students as "indispensable". The mentor mainly provided:

- Planning advice and encouragement to complete the course;
- Guidance and a sounding board for assessment tasks;
- Reassurance - in that the mentor had already successfully completed the course; and
- A "familiar face" in the online community.

Without a mentor, the course would have been more isolating from a learning point of view and perhaps difficult to complete. The value of the mentor is captured in this student comment: "*... even if the mentor was not required for a specific query it was "nice to know that someone was out there" ...*"

#### OTHER VALUABLE SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Most of the induction was in the form of online tutorials covering a course overview, electives, assessment tasks, the role of the mentor and online etiquette. Students were also asked to email the group to introduce themselves and their background and to provide an online resume. All communication about the course (eg. scheduling convenient tutorial times) was through the email facilities on FirstClass, so students were required to use the software to retrieve essential information.

Before commencing the course, one month of induction was thought to be too long. Upon reflection, it was probably appropriate. Aside from an introduction to the actual course it provided additional value for online learning because subconsciously it was a "hands on" way of experiencing what the course would be like. It was also a way of maintaining momentum over a longer period. After a few weeks the "novelty" of logging in to a computer and participating in the online community could have easily worn off if it was not for the continual need to participate in the induction activities to explore the online features and the new way of working. The course coordinator who took most of the induction had a very reassuring attitude that came through with the language and symbols she used in the online tutorials. The induction was also very flexible. Students who may have been slower at setting up their software could still receive the information by reading a transcript of the tutorials that was posted online for example. Once the course outline was explained, faster students could go ahead with tasks since the history of previous classes were also available online.

Although the course was "online", the supporting 23-page study guide was a document designed to be read in hard copy (also available as a pdf file). In the author's experience, an online course did not equate to a "no paper" course! The study guide contained information that is generally contained in such a guide like the course topics, learning outcomes and assessment tasks.

Additional very useful features included a month by month suggested approach to studying the course and a learning contract. Over the six months, students were expected to regularly contribute to the online community discussions and at the end of the six months, all (ten) assessment tasks were due. The month by month suggested approach was checklist of tasks to complete over the month which essentially ensured that assessment tasks were continually tackled rather than being left to the very end. It also include 'tips' like emailing your mentor to let

them you how you were going, even if you had no specific queries. The learning contract was a page that outlined goals for the course such as how often you would log on, the elective you would select and an overall study plan. Again, an essential ongoing reference during the six months.

#### OVERVIEW OF NEGATIVES

Overall there was one main negative. The type of learner that you have to be to study online was not emphasised enough during the course in the author's view. The study guide does have some information about online behaviour but it is hard to really grasp this by just reading words such as these:

*You need to develop a study plan that suits your learning style and stick to it. We cannot stress enough how important it is to use Firstclass often. The key to success is not learning a few skills, but developing an online behaviour ... Coming to a face to face class is often a reactive way of learning, whereas online learning needs to be PROactive.*

Developing an "online behaviour" and controlling the direction of your own learning was much more challenging than anticipated. The amount of time and discipline needed to make the most of the experience was totally underestimated. One tutor explained that a one-hour online tutorial was equivalent to about three hours concentration in a traditional class, which was definitely a fair estimate. It was easy to interpret fewer hours in physical attendance at a class to mean less hours and effort needed to complete the course, which was in fact incorrect. A tutorial every week (for three months) was relatively intense, especially when there was extensive preparation to do before each tutorial and email messages to read and send in between times.

Also, the online tutorials were basically only a stimulus to a particular topic and then it was up to students to research and reflect at times that suited the student over the six-month period. There were some mechanisms used to encourage participation (such as quizzes and new reference material). However it was difficult to continue, especially if a few days went by without computer contact (for example when travelling or busy researching for the assessments). These requirements were recognised in some early diary notes made by the author: *"Because there is no set time and place to attend regularly, it is hard to be pro-active and maintain momentum in your study ... will have to find my own way much more than I thought ... need to figure it out for yourself..."*

#### APPLICATION TO TEACHING HEALTH STATISTICS

There is a range of advantages that online learning could offer a course in health statistics especially broadening participants to include geographically dispersed students and expert tutors and offering a new experience via a community based model. However, one of the key success factors would be the support services offered to students, in particular a thorough accompanying study guide and consideration of a personal mentor for each student. An initial apprehension about participating in an online community can be easily addressed by encouraging tutors and a thorough induction period.

A feature of the online community that would lend itself well to health statistics is showcasing past student work online, providing contextual and reference material to supplement the course content and offering incentives for online discussions. These strategies would be useful for health statistics as the research undertaken in the *Online Professional Development* course revealed a rich set of web-based resources including datasets, analysis tools and other resource material on the Internet. Also, these features provide more flexibility for different students to work at their own pace in their own time. Incentives such as threaded discussions, quizzes or job announcements would be essential given that most people who undertake study in health statistics are working full time clinically and may not have continual access to a computer.

Finally, based on this experience it would also be wise in designing any online course to consider prerequisites related to learning style. For example, potential online health statistics students should have a desire to be:

- Willing to learn from others
- Prepared to be resourceful
- Responsible for their own learning

This may be a challenge in health statistics since the area traditionally attracts scientific, structured learners yet online learning is more much malleable. Issues about learning styles are probably best addressed by potential students talking to previous students (or teachers who have experienced online learning!) about their online experience, as it is difficult to convey the challenges in written words alone.

#### REFERENCES

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