

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Based on the knowledge generated from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework projects and selected external literature, the Quick Guides series provides an introduction to key issues related to flexible and online delivery of Vocational Education and Training (VET).

Effective Online Facilitation

Australian Flexible Learning Quick Guide Series

Scope of this guide

This Quick Guide looks at effective online facilitation and its importance in online teaching and learning.

Specifically it unpacks the various interpretations of 'facilitation', the impact of online mediums on teacher and student roles, facilitation strategies, and emerging models and theories. The focus of this guide is on practical application and strategies associated with the facilitation of student learning.

This guide will be of relevance principally to teachers and learning support staff delivering courses or supporting students online, and designers of online teaching programs.

What do we mean by 'online facilitation'?

Online facilitation, in broad terms can be described as the act of managing the learners and the learning through an online medium.

Facilitation can also refer to the managing 'the communication of others online' (Coghlan 2001). In online learning this managing is usually done by a teacher or tutor. It is frequently referred to in the literature as 'online moderation', though moderating can also be a student task in some circumstances.

Facilitation is also a pedagogical term that applies to student-centred approaches to teaching as opposed to teacher-driven – the teacher's role moving from *expert* to one of *facilitation* – "sage on the stage" to "guide on the side" (Kempe 2001).

All three are usually inextricably entwined when it comes to online teaching.

Why is it important?

Just as the teacher manages discussions and learning activities in the traditional classroom, so it is online. However, online teaching has some special challenges: students often have not met one another or the teacher, the nature of communication is limiting and void of visual cues, and there are challenges keeping tabs on individual students' learning when they are studying remotely. The role of the online teacher or facilitator is therefore both special and crucial for effective learning outcomes and enjoyable learning experiences.

Online teaching is moving from an emphasis on web content to a more interactive structure that recognises the social and interactive elements of knowledge construction, and to pedagogical approaches that enable student-centred (e.g. problem-based, inquiry-based, discovery, and authentic learning) which are found to be extremely effective for online learning (Jasinski 2001; Ambrose 2001; Salmon 2000b). Teachers need to have much more than just technical competence if they are to be successful online. They need an understanding of the dynamics of online communication and interactions and need to learn effective ways of facilitating and teaching online.

It should not be assumed that teachers (or students for that matter) automatically know how to communicate or behave online (Coghlan 2001). Many do not and require professional development or mentoring in the skills and techniques of facilitating.

How do we measure effectiveness

The ultimate goals of effective design of online teaching programs from a teaching perspective should be to facilitate learning, and "meaning making" (Salmon 2000b), and to meet the academic, social¹ and pragmatic needs of learners (Kempe 2001). Effective online facilitation should engage, guide and motivate learners, and provide a safe and conducive environment for learning and communication exchange for all learners regardless of their prior experience and predisposition or otherwise towards online learning technologies. These criterion can form the basis of a framework for measuring the effectiveness of online facilitation.

¹ Social in this sense refers to comfort and personal requirements associated with learning.

Much of the writings about online facilitation is based on collaborative or group learning/participation rather than self-paced, autonomous learning. The terms 'online community' or 'learning community' are often used in these contexts. Collison et al. (2000, p. 77) claim healthy online groups have the following characteristics:

- Participants post [messages and participate in discussion forums] regularly ['regularly' being defined as appropriate to the context]
- The online community meets its members' needs, and participants express honest opinions
- Participant-to-participant collaboration and teaching are evident, and spontaneous moderating occurs among the participants
- Reasonable venting about technology, content, and even the facilitator is acceptable and evident
- Participants show concern and support for the community.

The role of facilitator

There is reasonable consensus within the literature about the changing and challenging role of the teacher in online learning. Kemshal-Bell (2001) gives good coverage on the collective views, categorising skills and attributes into three main areas – technical skills, facilitation skills, and managerial skills.

Facilitation skills include:

- engaging the learner in the learning process, particularly at the beginning
- appropriate questioning, listening and feedback skills
- the ability to provide direction and support to learners
- skills in managing online discussion
- ability to build online teams
- a capacity for relationship building
- motivational skills.

It is also seen as important for teachers to have a positive attitude to online teaching and an ability to be innovative and experimental (risk taking).

Different authors have concluded similarly but used different categories to describe the different aspects of facilitation. For example, Morten Flate Paulsen (1995) uses '*organizational*', '*social*' and '*intellectual*' to describe facilitator functions. Collison et al. (2000) use the categories of '*guide on the side*', '*instructor or project leader*', and '*group process facilitator*' (p. 43).

Whilst many of the facilitation tasks appear very similar to those required in face-to-face teaching, in an online setting some are quite unique (Ambrose 2001; Flexways). For example it requires special skills by the facilitator to progress conversations from trivial surface level discussion and social exchange to deeper level engagement (Ambrose 2001; Sherry, Tavalin & Billig 2001; Collison et al. 2000). These are skills that can be learnt (Collison 2000).

Collison et al. (2000, Chapter 5) divides skill sets for online facilitation into '*basic and general netiquette*' to establish functional and effective online programs, and second level skills, that is the ability to employ '*advanced dialogue strategies*' for deeper level learning and more effective outcomes.

The facilitator, can be, but is not always, the developer of online learning content, and does not necessarily have to be the content expert either (Collison et al. 2000).

The *Australian Flexible Learning Framework* Flexways Project has developed an online tool for VET teachers, professional development coordinators, and managers to assess skill development needs for online teaching and facilitation and other aspects of online delivery, and to construct a professional development plan accordingly for individuals or a group. See <http://flexways.flexiblelearning.net.au/index.jsp>

Facilitating online learning – some of the challenges

- Designing the right mix of online and off-line activities (referred to by some as ‘blended learning’)
- Keeping tabs on individual students’ progress
- Catering for different learning preferences and learner needs
- Adopting student-centred approaches, and learning to become a ‘guide’ or ‘facilitator’
- Dealing with the pragmatics of teaching online – e.g. administrative and support requirements, and issues of time
- Dealing with technical issues.

Facilitating online communications – some of the challenges

- Avoiding the dangers of misinterpretation of text (and assisting students to do the same) (Sherry et al. 2001, p. 4)
- Dealing with silences (the dread of all online moderators) and getting students to actively participate (Benfield 2000)
- Finding the right voice (i.e. techniques for communicating and responding to achieve particular outcomes – see Collison et al. 2000)
- Finding the optimal balance between private email and public discussion (Collison et al. 2000)
- Standing back, and allowing students to discover the power and potential of the medium for self and group learning and not purposely or inadvertently dominating or stifling discussion.

Lessons Learned

Some of the lessons learned about successful online facilitation:

On techniques to assist student learning:

- Students need to be encouraged to take responsibility for themselves – and they don’t all take to this readily, or without anguish (Ambrose 2001)
- Articulation of reasoning, knowledge, or problem solving processes – assist participants to become more aware of their own thinking and reasoning and assists them to inquire into others’ thinking and reasoning (Sherry et al. 2001)
- Successful facilitation requires attendance to the ‘social’ aspect of learning as well as to the ‘learning task’ (Ambrose 2001).

On establishing, maintaining, and promoting community values:

- The importance of respecting and valuing multiple perspectives, which first requires applying conscious thought to one’s own (Sherry et al. 2001).

On promoting effective interactions and dialogue:

- A mix of probes and supportive comments helps to extend conversations (Sherry et al. 2001).
- Deeper level engagement can be encouraged by use of carefully considered moderating techniques. Likewise, degeneration of meaningful dialogue into less purposeful discussion can be controlled through moderator/mentor interventions (Sherry et al. 2001; Ambrose 2001; Salmon 2000b).
- Online engagement to a degree has to be engineered. That is, it needs to be part of an intended design. For example you cannot expect students to engage in meaningful discussion on a particular topic if each are at different stages in the learning program. Also, group work and ongoing dialogue are best maintained if there is a common goal or purpose.
- Critiques work best when interspersed with supportive comments. The focus needs to be very much on the positives (Sherry et al. 2001).
- Critiques that address specific features of a participant's request for feedback are taken seriously (Sherry et al. 2001).
- The importance of providing a safe environment for participation in online communications and activities. Students will not engage fully unless the environment is non-threatening and they feel it is safe to do so (Ambrose 2001).

On the pragmatics of teaching online:

- Teacher workload in responding to individual students online is an often quoted concern. "Co-construction of meaning" both in face-to-face classes and online is one way of dealing with this and breaking away from the student-teacher dependency model i.e. encouraging collaborative work and student-student or group discussion (Sherry et al. 2001).
- Students often report being overwhelmed by messages. Again, collaborative work and smaller group discussions can be a way of breaking communication down to more manageable dialogue (Sherry et al. 2001). Summarising and weaving conversations (facilitation techniques that can be learnt by facilitators) also keeps students focussed and assists in making the communications more manageable (Collison et al. 2001; Salmon 2000b).
- Group work and group discussions can alleviate some of the problems of access when students are not able to connect regularly as a smaller group and collaborative engagements can be more accommodating and self-supporting (Sherry et al. 2001).

On teacher preparation:

- The best way for teachers to learn how to be an effective online facilitator is for them to experience the process first-hand – undertake an online course themselves and experience what it's like from a student perspective (Kempe 2001; Salmon 2000b; Ambrose 2001).
- Whilst teacher knowledge and skills are important, positive attitudes are even more critical for successful online teaching (Kempe 2001). This may require convincing teachers of the benefits and need for online teaching in the first instance, and providing a supportive framework.
- Professional development activities, when preparing staff for online facilitation, need to incorporate activities that support the social and collaborative learning elements of learning, as identified in a substantial body of the literature (De Cicco 2002).

Moderation models

There are various moderation models now being presented to assist teachers understand the fundamental concepts of facilitation and as a basis for theorising.

Some of the more notable are:

- Salmon's Five Stage Moderation Model
- Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker's Facilitation model
- Paulsen's Function model
- Hootstein's 'Four Pairs of Shoes' Model

Salmon's five stages are

- Stage 1: Access and motivation
- Stage 2: Socialization
- Stage 3: Information Exchange
- Stage 4: Knowledge Construction
- Stage 5: Development

Each stage calls for different e-moderating skills requiring participants to master certain technical skills and steps learners through a logical process of induction before deeper level interactions occur. Students learn through participation and engagement. Motivation is the key, and so is the provision of a conducive structure and environment.

Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker's model is based on techniques used by the moderator to guide and facilitate the learning. It is premised on the view that appropriate communication interventions by the moderator can move students forward and facilitate (but should not lead) their understandings.

Paulsen maintains that moderators should identify their preferred pedagogical style, based on their philosophical orientation, their chosen moderator roles, and their preferred facilitation techniques. Moderator roles can at times vary. Facilitation functions are classified under headings of *organizational*, *social* and *intellectual facilitation*.

Hootstein proposes a model in which the e-learning facilitator or moderator "wears 'four pairs of shoes' - acting as instructor, social director, program manager, and technical assistant". In the instructor role the instructor guides the learning in a problem-centred learning environment, offering insights and assisting learners. As a social director they create and foster a collaborative environment. A program manager directs the agenda. And as a technical director they "assist students to become comfortable with systems and software and prepare learners to resolve ...technical difficulties that may occur".

Each model presents a different way of conceptualising the learning and facilitation interactions and provides useful techniques, and each has made a significant contribution to the research fields of online learning and computer-mediated communication.

Useful Tools and Resources

Texts on facilitation

E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online

Book by Gilly Salmon, an experienced moderator, researcher, and online teacher of international acclaim. Salmon lays out in clear terms the qualities and competencies required for online teaching. Of particular note is the practical five step model to facilitate effective communication and interaction. The text is used by many as a professional development resource. It includes many practical resources that can be used by practitioners.

Facilitating On-line Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators

Book by G Collison, B Erlbaum, S Haavind, and R Tinker. Another principal text for practitioners wanting to learn basic or advanced techniques of online facilitation.

Teaching Online: A Guide for Teachers, Facilitators and Mentors

A guide for teachers, facilitators and mentors produced by RMIT.

<http://www.learnlinks.com.au/docs/downloads/online.pdf>

Articles on online facilitation

Teaching on the Web – Exploring the Meanings of Silences

An article by G Benfield, provides explanation on why silence occurs in online conversations and provides practical advice on coping with them.

<http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/online/benfield1.htm>

e-Moderation – Managing A New Language?

Paper presented by Michael Coghlan at the NET*Working 2001 Conference, discusses the various communication options available to support online teaching and learning (i.e. synchronous and asynchronous). Coghlan looks at 'what constitutes successful online facilitation and examines theoretical models that attempt to make explicit e-moderation strategies'. Provides links to a number of authoritative sites.

http://www.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/nw2001/emod_newlang.htm

Wearing Four Pairs of Shoes: The Roles of E-Learning Facilitators

An article in Learning Circuits by Ed Hootstein on the roles of an e-learning facilitator and ways in which the facilitator guides learning.

<http://www.learningcircuits.org/2002/oct2002/elearn.html>

The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator

This article by Zane Berge published in Educational Technology describes the role and functions associated with online facilitation. A dated but much quoted article.

http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html

Virtual Games for Real Learning: Fast, Cheap, Effective

A paper presented at NET*Working 2000 by Marie Jasinski and Sivasailam Thiagarajan who are researching email games as a way of facilitating dialogue for the construction and sharing of new knowledge, understanding perspectives and insights. Email games are templates (or frames) that can be adapted to the learning and learner requirements. This paper discusses issues and considerations when designing and facilitating games, and describes three of them.

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/nw2000/talkback/p51.htm>

Relevant Australian Flexible Learning Framework websites

Flexways

This website developed by the Flexways project (also known as Staff Capability Review Models; Capability Review - Closing the Gap) provides a practical online tool to help people identify skills, actions and professional development resources required to achieve identified scenarios based around online course development or teaching objectives.

<http://flexways.flexiblelearning.net.au>

LearnScope Virtual Learning Community

The LearnScope website is a professional development space that aims to promote discussion and sharing on online teaching and learning issues. It links to relevant articles and resources, LearnScope projects and general discussion forums, and is a dynamic site providing lots of support for online practitioners.

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/LearnScope>

EdNA VET Online

A major portal serving the VET, higher education and school communities. The EdNA VET section provides annotated links to resources, many of which relate to online teaching and learning, and a wide range of services. Useful browse categories to explore are 'Project, Research, Development/delivery modes/online, computer-based learning'; and 'teaching with new technologies' categories. The EdNA site also has communication services, including online forums for discussion available from the 'Communicate' menu.

<http://www.edna.edu.au/vet.html>

Online courses on facilitation

e-Moderation

Online Short course by Learnlinks on online facilitation skills.

Contact: Email: LearnLinks@rmit.edu.au

<http://www.learnlinks.com.au>

Online Communication - Let's Get Connected

A William Angliss short course (fully online) facilitated by Pam Wright, for TAFE and ACE practitioners to develop basic online facilitation skills.

Contact: Phone:(03) 9606 211 (Information Centre)

Email: Pam Wright pamelaw@angliss.vic.edu.au

http://www.angliss.vic.edu.au/angliss_online/pages/pd_training.htm#commun

Online Facilitation (Teaching and Communicating Online)

A Central Gippsland short course (fully online), facilitated by Brad Beach and Vanessa Marsh.

Contact: Phone: (03) 5120 4577 (Brad Beach)

Email: bradleyb@gippstafe.vic.edu.au

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HTML and PDF versions available at:

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/guides/facilitation.html>

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