"Sierra Sam" does online learning.

Online learning experiences as a test dummy. Experiences of staff development, and applying findings into an information literacy context.

ABSTRACT

Through TAFE LearnScope funding I was given the opportunity to participate as an online learning student. I will outline experiences and learning of myself and other project participants in being an online learner , and how I've been able to create an information literacy exercise from the online course I undertook.

INTRODUCTION

Like Sierra Sam the original test dummy (Enever, 1999) an opportunity arose at Victoria University, through TAFE LeanScope funding (See http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/ronj/), to go where no human had gone before and to record those experiences. To participate as an online learning (test dummy) student, and not just survive, but to report back the good, the bad, and the ugly experiences of this undertaking.   As one of eight participants in this project the most interesting part was gaining an insight into the experience of these other online learners in diverse online learning courses.

The experiences of the others in the LearnScope project were presented at an end of project seminar. Each participant at the seminar gave a brief overview of the course they undertook, and outlined the good and not so good experiences encountered as an online student. These experiences have not been exhaustively analyzed and are subjective from each individual. Where appropriate I have included in this paper some of the overviews and experiences from the project, as well as my personal overview and

experience as an online student.

The course I undertook was the Teaching Skills for Information Skill Librarians (TSISL). (See http://www.library.unsw.edu.au/~sshl/teach/hello.htm). This was a staff development course for library staff run through the University of New South Wales. The objectives of this course were to enhance the ability of participants to contribute in a more effective and efficient way to the development of information skills amongst students and staff in their home institutions. And to ensure that the course design and delivery skills of information skills librarians are appropriate to the latest technological environment. There is further detail about this course outlined in the following section of the paper. Other courses undertaken by the LearnScope project group were MS Office Pack – Access and Word, MS Office Pack – Publisher & FrontPage, MYOB, Focus on the Short Story, Intermediate Fiction Writing: Novel, Community Analysis & Health Care Planning (Master of Nursing), and Narratology in Dealing with Social Complexity (Master of Applied Science-Social Ecology-Cultural Action).

The objectives for myself and fellow Sierra Sams for the LearnScope project were to;

❑ Expose Victoria University staff to online learning,

❑ To enable Victoria University staff to evaluate online learning as a learning
style for adults,

❑ To identify characteristics of a successful online learning program

❑ Provide skills for Victoria University staff to benchmark their own course upon the
basis of their learning.

❑ Improve online study opportunities for students of Victoria University.

RESULTS/DISCUSSION

The course I undertook, Teaching Skills for Information Skill Librarians (TSISL), would be classified by my institution as mixed mode. It had a face-to-face component for two and a half days, and was then presented via an online web site. The web site provided bulletin board style communication, as well as a direct email prompt if anything was added to the bulletin board. There was also email contact via a listserv for the participants of the course, and another web site that had the core component of the course material. The course had five modules covering communication and experimental learning, instructional design, and using technology in teaching. Assessment was based on class participation, and a completed project at the end of the course.

Some of my fellow LearnScope project participants enrolled in courses, which were totally online. Some found that there were big slabs of text online, which equated in their opinion to a distance education course. Like some of my fellow Sierra Sams it was easier to print out the text from the web based course and read it off line. Hara (1999) stated,

> "A large fraction of articles about computer-mediated distance education emphasize the potentials of new technology, and understate the extent to which instructors may need to develop new pedagogies as well as different approaches to managing their online course. High quality online education is neither cheap nor easy." (Conclusion section, para 4.)

In support of this view one participant found their course's content was written for an online medium. It was clear, relevant, and well explained. In contrast one participant found their course didn't allow for much thinking just pointing and clicking a computer mouse and getting an answer – observing rather than learning. The course I undertook had a good balance of content within the modules, and was reasonably clear. However it was mostly big slabs of text without much interaction required in the modules. It should be noted that my fellow Sierra Sams were TAFE teachers who were probably looking critically at the course content. In concluding remarks about what participants had learnt from their online learning experience one stated that no matter how good the technology is, how well structured the site and how well written the material, learning does not necessarily flow. Another participant mentioned how courses labeled as online learning may in fact be flexible learning or there may be better ways of delivery some courses than what is currently offered.

One of the best aspects of online learning which I, and my fellow Sierra Sams, found was the interaction, relating to, and communicating with our fellow online students, tutors and teachers in the courses we undertook. One participant in an American online writers course found that interacting with students from other countries gave a different perspective in class discussions. Bates (1994) claims, "one of the major contribution of two-way technologies is allowing interactions among students as well as between students and instructors" (Hara (1999) Dealing with frustrations section, Commentary para. 1). However Hara (1999) found in their case study of a particular online course that "some students never overcame their frustrations, despite a great deal of interaction with others" (Dealing with frustrations section, Commentary para. 1) In an experimental

design carried out by Schutte (1996) where half a class was taught in a virtual environment, and the other half taught in a traditional class room environment, "the result was that the virtual interaction produced better results. The performance differences can be attributed to student collaboration as to the technology, itself. In fact the highest performing students (in both classes) reported the most peer interaction". (Discussion para.1 & 3). However collaboration and student learning may also depend on the nature of the online course. One LearnScope participant doing an MYOB course found that there was no need for interaction with fellow students. The nature of the subject was to just do the required modules and communicate with the tutor. "Simply providing resources for learning does not ensure that learning takes place. Students need specific guidance on how to use electronic resources effectively" (Jackson, Conclusion section para. 5.) For myself, and some of the other LearnScope participants', time, effort, and motivation to actually utilize everything provided in the course was a hindrance. Initial enthusiasm died out, and then a feeling of isolation without any contact or support set in. Actual online learning doesn't always live up to expectations. A case study from Hara (1999) found the three main sources of frustrations in an examination of several major U.S. university online courses were technological problems, minimal and not timely feedback from the instructor, and ambiguous instructions on the web site as well as via email. It was noted by myself, and other LearnScope participants that there is often a presumption and requirement of good computer skills for online learning courses. There is often little scope for training or introduction in how to utilize the online environment. One Sierra Sam found that the only provision for assistance on the online course for contact was an email button for course information, for tutors, IT technician assistance etc. A phone number would have been much more helpful, quicker, and simpler for that student. There is sometimes a presumption by course providers in knowing how a student will use a particular

computer packages and software, and which software the student will utilize. In my course there was a presumption that Internet Explorer would be used as a browser to access the modules. In using Netscape there were some problems in authorization and the layout, orientation, and set out on the screen of the modules looked slightly different depending on which web browser, Netscape or Internet Explorer, was used.

Positive, personal, helpful, constructive, and timely feedback from tutors was experienced by most of the participants in the study. One of my experiences that demonstrated presumption on the instructor's part however was ringing her up after not hearing anything from her for a couple of weeks after submission of an assignment. It appeared that their University was on an intrasemester break, which didn't coincide with a break on my University's part. There was a presumption that all students were on a break, which doesn't necessarily happen in an online environment.

An aspect of online courses that was found to be frustrating by myself and some of this group of Sierra Sams was the inflexibility of entry/exit into the course. The courses often coincided with University semester arrangements. Although publized as flexible, and giving an impression of being able to take the course at your own pace specific dates were set and had to be met, particularly for assignment/project due dates. One online course was subject to getting the student numbers before proceeding. Another aspect of frustration was payment for courses, which couldn't, in all cases, be undertaken online, but required dealing with, as in my case, the University cashier. One Sierra Sam experienced frustration in finding outdated information on the Internet relating to a course that was to be undertaken. It was only after time delays and email that a more appropriate course was found. From these experiences the LearnScope project felt that

the University should compile a list of online courses staff/students could undertake, make the enrolment process a straight forward for students, and keep the online information up to date and easy to find for potential clients.

CONCLUSIONS

As a final project in undertaking the TSISL course I created an online teaching resource for myself and my library colleagues.   It can be accessed at the following URL. http://dev.library.vu.edu.au/graemeo/TSISL/libraryoverview.htm The resource will need updating and ongoing maintenance as our library web site changes and the needs of our students change. As an Information Literacy resource it acts more as a teaching resource, but also as a resource for students who undertake a library orientation session to look again at the resource for more information, and/or to reinforce what they may have seen demonstrated in the face to face class room environment. Different people learn in different ways, and are stimulated by different learning activities (Leopold-Lusmann, 2000). "The application of learning styles theory to the design of on-line courses is highly relevant as the teacher cannot directly observe how students utilize the teaching strategies provided." (Leopold-Lusmann, Conclusion section para.1). The TSISL course helped to develop and consider learning styles of the students that I deal with, and to implement this into the online resource. Considerations such as Adult learning style, and applying models of experiential learning into a training and work context were considered when putting together the resource.

Fellow Sierra Sams learnt new skills in computer packages, one found that they "learn better" from a more active, problem-based approach to new skills rather than the passive

approach, and a few, including myself, are implementing what they have learnt into their teaching. Some of the aspects the LearnScope project felt the University could learn from our experiences have been outlined above, but some other aspects are the realization that it takes a huge amount of time and effort to get things online and to stay relevant and focused for online learning. Student and tutor expectations need to be made clear from the outset of the online course, and students need and expect clear and timely feedback. There needs to be multiple contact points on a page presented online, e.g. email, phone, and addresses etc. And ideally there should be flexible entry and exit for online courses.

Two of the project objectives were met. To expose Victoria University staff to online learning, and to identify characteristics of a successful online learning program, and these have been outlined above. The objective to evaluate online learning as a learning style was not explored greatly, nor mentioned in participants overviews. The objectives to provide a benchmark for own course development and improve online study opportunities for the students of Victoria University may come as a result of the participants undertaking this study, and applying these experiences to course development. An overview of the groups experiences were presented at the University's annual Teaching and Learning Symposium. As a result of this presentation the objectives may be met by Victoria University staff developing online learning for their students and applying some of the good experiences we encountered to their online learning modules.

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