

My life online!

I can remember my husband suggesting that I should move from a very modern typewriter to our new computer. I was horrified. What for, I was perfectly happy on the typewriter and it was doing everything that I needed to do at that moment in time. In time I had no choice because the typewriter was removed. I'm sure this scenario was repeated every day in our schools, universities and workplaces. My journey has continued from these hesitant beginnings into what has almost become a life online. I communicate online, I write and scan my annual Christmas letters online, I teach and learn online, I can't imagine my life offline!

In 1996 I was encouraged by my Faculty to undertake an external certificate through the University of London. The certificate was in Online Education and Training and involved a number of readings sent in hard copy, followed by numerous email tutorials, participation in email discussions, specific tutorials by experts and email responses to questions. The final assessment was a written paper on a possible use of online facilities in our own teaching and learning. I can remember being overwhelmed by the power of emails to communicate with other students from all over the world and the ability to actually teach and learn through emails. I was hooked and began to explore the possibilities within my own teaching and learning.

As a lecturer in Arts I was often faced with the threat of units being slashed because of low numbers. One such unit was an elective entitled Dance in Education. In order to save this elective and to experiment with online teaching and learning I worked with a web editor to create the unit, Dance Online. (Dance in Education). If we could dance online then anything was possible. My unit was a specific web site with a link to the Universities NTUeXchange, a discussion board that I made extensive use of in the unit. My students arrived as internal students and I advised them of the unit's format. Two students immediately withdrew and I can remember being quite deflated by their lack of enthusiasm for something I was very enthusiastic about! As the semester progressed, we would occasionally meet face-to-face to demonstrate an assessment task, however most of the unit was done online. The students gradually became impressed with the flexibility of access and the individual responses from me. I also found that some students who were always very quiet in my face-to-face

sessions were very articulate online and revealed considerable knowledge and understanding about dance and teaching generally. The unit was successful and is still in use today.

I continued developing a number of electives in this way and also decided to explore the use of online teaching and learning with my internal students. With my web editor I developed a web site for a compulsory unit within the Bachelor of Teaching course, Arts in Education. This was initially just a unit outline with one online assessment task that was forwarded to me through email as well as participation in the University's discussion board. This worked successfully and allowed students access to the lecturer through emails and discussion board for specific questions and/or to share personal experiences. I found this extremely useful in getting to know the cohort of students. However I was never able to change the web site without my web editor's assistance, which was frustrating and time consuming.

In 1998 I was invited to visit QUT to observe their use of online teaching and learning. Their IT department had devised their own program that allowed lecturers to create web sites. This seemed to me an ideal way of overcoming my problem. Later that year I attended an ASCILITE conference and was introduced to Blackboard.com, which again offered a web site that could be created by the teacher. I returned to my university and began to create a number of sites using the free blackboard.com framework site. Once again I was hooked. This software offered me an opportunity to create my own site for any unit. Using the suggested format I was able to include course outlines, course documents with all my lecture and workshop activities, external links and a wonderful email and discussion board facility. I introduced it to my internal students who were completing an IT skills activity as part of a compulsory unit entitled Technology in Education. Each week's activities were clearly set out for students to read, print off, and/or follow. Specific activities that they were to complete for a final

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assessment portfolio were also included. This meant that students could access and complete the work at home, in a library or wherever and, most importantly, at a time that was convenient to them. I was always available during set times for assistance with software or program difficulties. The only problem with the site was that as a free site it was extremely slow and students would become frustrated. This was overcome when in 2000 the University purchased the blackboard.com software.

I now have all my units on blackboard.com and am trialing the use of the one site for internal and external students with the external materials being able to be printed off for external students who still prefer print based materials. This allows for a seamless unit, assisting lecturers in the preparation and correction of internal and external work. It also allows for more communication between internal and external students within the discussion board. Some disadvantages include the continual monitoring of the discussion board, however it does mean that I can access it from home, at times that suit me and most importantly it allows me to get to know my students and utilise their knowledge and experiences. I am still learning to utilise all that my 'blackboard' can do and have tried putting videos of internal lectures and workshops on line for students to access. I have also put exemplars of students work in the assessment areas to assist students in their understanding of the assessment tasks. The flexibility and accessibility of Blackboard makes for an

exciting teaching and learning environment and provides me with a medium to continue my own exploration of teaching and learning.

My rationale for placing my dance unit online in 1996 is still relevant today and best sums up the reasons for my life online.

The reasons for working online include,

- increased flexibility. You will be able to access the unit without waiting for information from the lecturer. You will also be able to study when it suits you.
- increased accessibility to resources. While the library and written materials can never be replaced there are enormous resources to access through the world wide web. We will also have the opportunity of communicating with dancers and choreographers.
- exploring the possibilities of teaching and learning on-line. As our teachers of the future you are continually being confronted with the use of computers in the classroom. By exploring your own learning and my teaching through the computer we will be able to ascertain the effectiveness of computers as a teaching and learning tool.
- Universities are being encouraged to present units in this format, so this is a starting point for your own continued education through online study. As teachers and learners we will be breaking new ground together so please be patient with me and be prepared to offer as much constructive criticism as possible.

(Dance in Education, Independent study. <http://www.learnline.ntu.edu.au> August 2002)

Working On-line

endless possibilities
increased flexibility
greater accessibility