

ONLINE COURSES FOR OLDER PEOPLE. DO THEY WORK?

When I visited Australia for the first time in 1998, I was fortunate to be staying with Dorothy Braxton, past president of Canberra U3A, when she was first exploring the idea of providing online courses by experienced U3A teachers for older people isolated by distance, or health or other reasons from benefiting from U3A group activities. There were already many commercial courses online but nothing to meet this particular need. I was particularly struck by the inter-active possibilities of e-mail and a course forum.

I responded to this idea for several reasons. First, I already knew from my local U3A experience, that many of our older members were dropping out, not through lack of interest but because they could no longer drive or take public transport to attend meetings. With the day to day pressures on local committee members, it was difficult to keep contact with ex-members and there was no alternative to offer them.

Secondly, as a keen Internet user, I was eager to explore new possibilities of using the World Wide Web resources to provide stimulation and active involvement in learning. As an internationally-minded person, I was also intrigued by the unique possibility of working simultaneously with older students from around the world.

Thirdly, as a writer/teacher, what a challenge to devise a course in this new medium. How could it be done? Clearly, potted lectures and chunks of information were no use. With no qualifications to obtain and no vocational advantage to be gained, the course would have to be interesting in its own right. The student would be an active learner and above all, enjoy working through the course.

The topic I chose was 'Design in your Life.' I had been involved in the Design Age project of the Royal College of Art in London since it began in 1992 and remained fascinated by the challenge of good design for all ages at a practical level. I am not, however, a professional designer and I worried that I might not be sufficiently expert to satisfy the students. I appealed to the Royal College of Art for backup and received good advice and permission to use several of their projects as course material. Best of all, a special online forum was set up for U3A members and professional designers to share ideas. I have to say that my lack of expertise and my efforts at shared learning, U3S style, have met no objections from students.

But how was I to write the course? U3A Online was soon set up in Australia and a format of an eight-week course with weekly units was agreed. There would be 'Activities' for the students in each unit, e-mail communication with the writer/tutor and a threaded forum for each course. My first draft was useless, -too complicated. I threw it out and started again with encouragement and good advice from the adult educators at Griffith University, Queensland. Pitching it at the right level was tricky. Finding Activities that could be carried out anywhere in the world, even in the most isolated places, made sure that I used the WWW resources to good effect to devise a sequence leading from objects in the home through to the design possibilities of New Technology. The course was then professionally edited in Australia.

The trial run had twelve Australian students, several of them disabled. Several were computer novices and needed a lot of support. At first I did not realise the need to reply immediately to students' e-mails and underestimated the importance of making sure all students understood what the course was about and how to respond. I now support the idea of an introductory week before Unit 1 goes out, to answer students' queries and to make sure they are all aboard. I also failed to realise that a course which relies heavily on Web sites has to find a way to cope with unobtainable URLs. But in spite of these teething troubles, the feedback was very encouraging and I pressed on.

For the second run, I asked permission to include students from other countries. I found 15 students from seven countries. As well as the UK and Australia, these included Germany, Finland, Italy, The Netherlands and the USA. Some of these students were 'isolated' and some had volunteered to act as guinea pigs to try out the course. Gabriele Körting, for example, tried out the course on behalf of ZAWiW and I hope she will tell you about her experiences. I was delighted to have Gaby (and her mother) on the course, (in spite of its being in English) and look forward to later developments in ZAWiW itself.

The third run was also experimental. Aiming for 'isolated' students meant that the numbers benefiting were small. Too small to encourage further funding. We needed to reach a larger number of students so I experimented with a mixture of individual students and U3A groups. One larger group took a year to complete the course. A smaller group enrolled as a 'student' and joined the forum. With the help of the group leaders, I have compiled suggestions for group use and discovered that the Design course can be adapted for both types of use.

What of the future? After so much hard-won experience, I am convinced that there is a need for U3A type online courses. I also feel that it is possible to maintain the special nature of U3A Online courses while reaching a wider audience and not losing that valuable inter-active experience. To demonstrate this, I have written a new course on 'Creative Writing.' I have planned this to be used by both individual students AND Creative Writing groups at the same time. The first trial will be, I hope, in January 2002.

Yes, writing online courses does involve a lot of time and effort, but the rewards are great. Please access u3aonline.org.au to read students' comments and find out more about other courses. My own favourite comment is from an Australian student who said, 'This course made me see the world through new eyes.' That is what I aimed to do and I feel privileged to be a pioneer writer/tutor, bringing stimulating learning activities and new friendships to older people.

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