Insights for delivering VET online

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KEY MESSAGES

High-quality online delivery is important for ensuring that the VET sector remains a reliable source of skills for the Australian labour market during and beyond the pandemic.

- There is no 'one size fits all' model of best practice online teaching and learning.
- Every training context is different and should remain responsive to the needs of the student cohort and the topic at hand.
- Good practice involves the incorporation of both instructional and participatory content, presented in either or both real-time and non-real-time formats.
- Despite training being facilitated online, technology should never drive learning design. Technology should always support good practice.

In recent years, elements of the vocational education and training (VET) sector have been moving towards the use of more online and blended models of teaching (Griffin & Mihelic 2019; NCVER 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated an accelerated and wide-ranging shift to online education, and research has found that many educators may not completely return to their pre-pandemic approaches (Hume & Griffin 2021). This means that VET delivery must adopt proven strategies to ensure that quality learning opportunities are available for students who are accessing their learning online.

This publication offers insights for educators, organisations and institutions to consider when designing and implementing training that is fully or partially online.

12 INSIGHTS

1 **Draw on a combination of both instructional content and participatory learning opportunities**

While participatory and collaborative learning opportunities represent good practice, both approaches usually benefit when foundational knowledge is delivered as instructional content. Instructional content can include both text-based and multimedia resources and can be presented either in real time or non-real time, with the educator actively present or absent in those materials. Instructional content tends to be transactional, with students receiving information and knowledge. In contrast, participatory content is designed for active student engagement.

This type of content supports students drawing and building upon their existing knowledge, perceptions and lived experiences. Participatory content can, but not always, incorporate opportunities for students to collaborate with peers from within their cohort to extend their knowledge development by sharing understandings and experiences.

	Instructional	**Participatory**
Real time	Such as utilising webinar-style presentations and other mediums (e.g. text-based spaces) to transmit content to students in real time	Such as utilising video and/or audio technology, or text and/or image spaces, to facilitate students contributing to, and actively engaging with or asking questions about, content in real time; may also include peer to peer engagement
Non-real time	Such as written and/or audio visual instructional content that may include textbooks, articles, images, pre-recorded videos, and so on that are made available for students to receive through reading, watching, or hearing	Opportunities for students to contribute to, and actively engage with or ask questions about content in their own time (e.g. completing a self-reflection activity, or contributing to a text-based group discussion); can include utilising a range of text, image, audio, or visual tools

2 **Draw on a combination of both real time and non-real time delivery**

It is important to consider drawing on the benefits of both real time and non-real time delivery approaches. Real time engagement can support: in-the-moment questions to be addressed; challenges to be navigated; and spontaneous and rich learning conversations. Engagement with learning content that happens in non-real time can support students to: engage when convenient; slow down, speed up, and repeat elements; and ponder and assimilate knowledge before moving forward. Importantly, rich learning conversations are not limited only to real time or live online opportunities and can be readily facilitated through other platforms, such as discussion boards and chat spaces.

3 **No one size fits all model**

The delivery of online training is, and should be, influenced by the unique variables of the teaching context at hand. This means that trainers and designers should adapt the balance and nature of training delivery to factors such as: class size; the discipline being taught; the intake model (concurrent or staggered student start dates); the infrastructure available to educators and students; and student needs, expectations and learning intent.

4 **Technology should support good online education, not drive it**

A common pitfall in online education is the practice of allowing the possibilities and constraints of the available technological tools to dictate how learning is delivered, facilitated and accessed. Research that investigated student experiences and subsequent learning outcomes, and took into account the observations of highly experienced online VET educators, found that good practice involves, first, designing the 'best' way to learn the element at hand and then, adopting the simplest applications of the available technological tools, in order to implement that ideal learning approach (Cox, N.D.).

5   Structure and clarity are key

Even more than other teaching and learning modes, successful online training features highly structured content. For online learning to be successful, students must be able to navigate their way to and through learning content and learning opportunities with ease. Switch-off and give-up rates are exacerbated when students feel lost or consider they are wasting time 'figuring out' the learning components.

Guidance to students on when to access a range of essential and supplementary components, in conjunction with hyperlinks or simplified menu trees, enhances learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Outcomes are further enhanced when the purpose of the critical learning elements is communicated to students and framed to demonstrate how engaging with that element will enable them to meet their learning goals. Communicating purpose helps to avoid a situation where students feel frustrated by perceived 'busy work'.

Explicit instructions and clearly communicated expectations are key. For example, when seeking active participation, clearly communicate the nature and timing of that participation, and lead by example where possible.

6   Not all content is essential for all learners

A feature of VET is the diversity of the participating students, including their career stage and reason for learning. This means that one cohort might include, for example, students who are learning for the purpose of entering an occupation or industry as well as those who are already experienced in that occupation or industry. A feature of good online VET delivery is communicating to students which learning materials and opportunities are intended for less experienced students who may benefit from additional resources.

Notably, many students dislike being put in a 'learning tunnel', whereby they are compelled to click every item in a series of compulsory elements in order to move forward. Having a balance of essential and supplementary resources and activities helps students to feel guided and supported, yet in control of their learning choices. The ideal balance varies according to programs and cohorts.

7   Adaptation, not replication

Learning either wholly or partially online is undoubtedly a different experience for students, meaning that attempts to replicate the nature of in-person classes are not generally recommended for many programs. Instead, it is important that educators adapt content and training approaches to optimise the opportunities they bring while finding ways to overcome constraints.

For example, platforms whereby students participate in a conversation that isn't conducted in real time can unlock a range of possibilities that are unique to learning online. These include enabling students to think through their responses before sharing them. Furthermore, peer contributions can be viewed without any bias toward gender, race, or physical appearance.

8   Consider the purpose of live online sessions

When the choice is made to incorporate live online sessions, it is important to ensure that the elements within these are highly purposeful. Current research indicates that students perceive positive learning outcomes from live online sessions when the purpose is (in order of student reported preference):

- to learn things that are 'too hard' to understand through other mediums such as videos, workbooks, and readings

- to receive real time support and have assessment questions answered

- to meet and work with other students, and benefit from organic, spontaneous learning conversations.

In contrast, students indicate that they generally dislike long live online sessions, or sessions where content is presented that has already been (or could have been) conveyed through other types of resources.

Drop-in support sessions are also well regarded by many students.

9   Video content

Many students indicated that they appreciate the incorporation of video content in their learning materials. Students like being able to watch videos when they want, where they want. They also appreciate being able to move backward and forward through video content, especially to revisit key concepts where necessary. As a result, a series of shorter videos is often viewed as more beneficial for learning than longer versions.

Notably, students rate more highly the experience of 'seeing' a professional educator with a clear message than they do movie-quality production values, also reporting that over-produced videos can be distracting. Students report liking videos where the educator communicates conversationally, in a relaxed yet articulate way, commenting that clearly visible facial expressions enhance believability. Videos do not need to be utilised solely for purposes of instructional or demonstration content. Indeed, welcomes, encouragements and relevant stories delivered via video are well regarded by students.

10   Human presence

An analysis of several best practice models of online education found that it is important to develop humanised relationships when teaching and learning online (Cox 2020). This includes the educator disclosing their personality and real-world experiences and explicitly facilitating opportunities for students to do the same. Providing opportunities for students to have some non-learning peer-to-peer interaction to develop human relationships and to feel part of a learning community can be beneficial, when practical to do so. Many programs also benefit from collaborative learning opportunities, whereby students can share and compare stories and experiences with peers. Importantly, these opportunities are not limited to synchronous courses. For example, students reading historical student posts and subsequently posting their own comparative reflections for the benefit of future students is an effective option for asynchronous courses.

11   Educator leading the learning journey

Educators are often surprised to discover that one of the first things many students access when entering an online course is the educator bio or 'about me' introduction. Students actively want to know who is leading their learning journey, meaning that the way the educator introduces themselves is critical for gaining student trust. Educators are advised to present a thoughtful introduction, one that demonstrates their teaching style. Introductions containing only contact information or which are written in a resume style are not well received by students and have been found to negatively affect factors such as trust and willingness-to-follow scores (Cox, N.D.).

12   Educator training

An extensive research project where the nature of online VET was conceptualised found that professional development to train educators to teach online must incorporate both how and why elements (Cox 2020). Rather than simply teach educators how to use a tool, professional development must also convey why using that tool in a particular way represents good practice. When an educators' knowledge — the 'how to' — is not aligned with their understanding of 'good' or ideal practice, then that educator is less likely to adopt the how-to messages and instructions received in training.

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