

Learning and the online environment
**A Web-based resource to support commencing students
at the University of Newcastle**

This Nuts & Bolts Workshop will present the resource we have developed to prepare students to become effective learners in an online environment.

The Workshop will begin with a brief overview of the background to, and rationale for the development of the resource. We will then outline the planning that we carried out prior to starting to develop the resource. We will spend the large part of the presentation demonstrating the resource, its components and their functions. We will draw attention to salient design features and to the multimedia aspects that have been carefully designed to engage students and to model “best practice” in facilitating quality learning.

The Workshop discussion section will focus on what others might find useful in the resource itself and in what we have learned in developing and refining it. We will also seek comments from Workshop participants about any improvements that might be considered.

Background

The University of Newcastle is a regional university with three campuses located on the mid-north coast, Hunter, and Central Coast regions of NSW, with a total student population of around 25,000. As is the case across the sector our student population is changing in important ways. A higher proportion of our students are enrolled in a program of study while they are undertaking part-time and even full-time work. The amount of time our students spend in paid work has increased. Many of our students also have additional family and other responsibilities that prevent them from being on campus for significant periods of time. The distinction between face-to-face and online delivery modes is, therefore, becoming less obvious.

The University of Newcastle is committed to increasing the flexibility of delivery of all its courses by the end of 2009. It is widely acknowledged that students now expect greater flexibility in access to university learning. Interestingly, however, while many students are “digital natives” and feel comfortable using online technologies, few are well equipped to harness such technologies for learning.

We, therefore, set out to design a Web-based resource to prepare students to learn effectively within online environments. Our overriding aim was to produce an online resource that would

model “best practice”. Our specific objectives in developing this resource were to assist students to:

- understand what is involved in learning;
- recognise what is important about learning in a university context;
- gain insight into their preferred approach to learning, and into the strengths and weaknesses associated with other styles of learning;
- appreciate what is involved in learning in an online environment;
- develop the skills for effective learning in an online environment; and
- engage with technologically-supported environments in ways that will maximise their learning.

Planning and producing the resource

To produce the resource, we went through the following six stages.

1. Researching. First, we consulted relevant literature and visited the Websites of other universities to obtain information about other possible resources of the kind that we were contemplating.
2. Conceptualising. In the second stage we worked collaboratively to outline the core structure, its major sections and subsections.
3. Writing. The third stage involved the writing and re-writing of the textual material to be used in the resource.
4. Enhancing. In this stage, we identified opportunities to include multi-media and interactive elements to enhance student engagement.
5. Reviewing and revising. We conducted workshop sessions and focus group discussions to seek comprehensive comment and feedback from learners and facilitators of learning.
6. Revising. We revised the resource by taking into account the comments and suggestions obtained during the workshops and focus group discussions.

The core content of the resource

The Web-based resource consists of the following modules:

1. *What is learning* encourages students to reflect on learning, the different kinds and contexts of learning, and indicators that can be used to reveal how effective learning has been.
2. *What is important about university learning* includes strategies, differences and values in university learning.
3. *How to be a productive learner* summarises the influences that can enhance and those that can inhibit learning. The section also outlines important strategies for self-managing and reflecting on learning within the University context.
4. *Learning online* introduces students to online learning, how and where it occurs, and tools that support online learning. The section prepares students to utilise online interactions and conversations as effective learning tools.
5. *Learning productively with an online environment* includes ‘Tips-‘n’-tricks’ for maximising learning in the online environment.
6. *Important online environments at the University of Newcastle* introduces students to the online environments used at our university.

Essential design features of the resource

The resource has been deliberately designed to model sound learning practice, by including the following features.

1. It is a Web-based resource to increase its accessibility to students and to allow them to work through it in a self-paced way.
2. It models the principles and strategies for effective use of technology.
3. It incorporates multimedia features (for example, brief videos, interactive self-assessment exercises) that reinforce salient points, highlight applications and examples, and provide examples of practice that students can utilise in their own programs of study.
4. It is attractive and engaging.

Future directions

We are currently in the process of finalising the development of the resource, which is to be launched with our incoming students in Semester 2 this year. We are committed to ongoing evaluation and improvement of the resource.

A presentation of our resource in a “Nuts & Bolts” session at the First Year in Higher Education Conference would be a valuable opportunity to share with colleagues and to seek comment on ***Learning and the online environment***.