

From the authors

It feels like a very long time ago, but in fact it was only 1997. Those were the early days of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), and I cut my teeth writing materials and tutoring on an online MA programme.

I learned the hard way. I'm primarily an educator, a face-to-face language teacher and teacher trainer. I knew next to nothing about technology back then. Apart from a technician in a T-shirt telling me (far too fast) how our online platform worked, I had absolutely no training.

Suddenly I found myself running this full MA programme online, with real students, and it was sink or swim. I don't think I exactly swam gold medal style but I managed to keep my head above water, although it cost me many sleepless nights. The course had no classroom component at all. As a face-to-face trainer, I knew it was important to get the group to gel online, and I also had to help my learners find their way around the VLE – all at a distance.

Where to start? What to do? How to design interactive and meaningful tasks for my learners? How to make the whole experience enjoyable for them and for me? How to keep us all afloat – for two whole years? I really didn't know. Nevertheless, for six months I survived and the group seemed to be coming along fine.

Then things changed. I took a six-week fully-online course run by a university in the UK.

A revelation! As a learner on a well-designed online course, I learned more in six weeks than in six months on my own. Not only important things about task design but, more importantly, I had the experience of being an online learner myself. It was a real eye-opener.

Although I consider myself an independent and self-motivated learner, I started to realise just how important tutor support is online, how a fast response time is fundamental, how being heard and responded to by both tutor and peers is vital, how tasks can be meaningful and collaborative. And praise! I needed praise from my tutor. Lots of it!

That's why Lindsay and I got together to write this book. Because, even now, there are still many of you out there who are asked to provide learners with online and blended (partly online) learning, but are given no support. You may get technical help with the VLE, but you often get no pedagogical support at all. We hope this book will provide it.

In 2003, my boss asked me to look into setting up a distance-learning component to our teacher training courses. I thought that this would simply involve putting material onto our website for students to download and read, and preparing a few assignments to go with it. The little distance learning I had done myself had been more or less that – the students were sent material, worked through it, sent it back; the tutor gave them a mark (and perhaps feedback).

I had heard of a new consultancy for teachers that specialised in online teaching, and I convinced my boss to let me do a course 'just in case there was anything we should know'. This was one of the first courses in e-moderation that Nicky and her colleague Gavin Dudeney were offering. My eyes were opened.

I realised there was far more to teaching online than providing input and expecting output in a series of one-way interactions. I learned how to navigate my way around a VLE. But I also learned how to create a group dynamic in which all the participants communicate with each other and learn from each other. I learned about motivation in online learning, and about the high rate of dropout on online courses that was sadly the norm for many institutions that did not properly deal with the medium of the internet and education. And all this was done 100% online.

I walked into my boss's office and said 'We have to completely rethink how we are going to do our online teaching'.

Since then, I have run numerous courses completely online, joined Nicky's consultancy and trained other teachers in e-moderation. It has been a very exciting seven years, as more and more tools appeared that can be harnessed for teaching. When Nicky asked me if I would like to contribute to a book containing all the techniques and activities she had developed over the years, I was delighted. It is always a pleasure to collaborate and work with one's teacher and mentor.

Teaching online is not the future anymore. It is an important part of the here and now of language teaching education. Teachers need to know what tools are out there and what techniques can help them to use these tools. We hope this book will provide support in a positive and practical way.

So if your boss tells you to start teaching some of your classes online, don't panic! You have in your hands a useful guide – to start, or further develop, your *Teaching Online*.



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