

## **Common factors influencing success in the online environment:**

### **A. The virtual classroom in practice: from observation to emergent model**

#### **1. Vision**

*“The success of an online program depends largely on a clear and cohesive vision providing direction.”*

Clearly articulated and evident whole school vision in relation to the use of online education in the classroom (both real and virtual) appears to be a key pre-requisite for sustained success in web-based learning. Online practice, guided by a clear vision statement and linked to specific program goals, seems to be highly significant in facilitating a number of important outcomes. These include more evident student ownership of their learning, higher levels of student achievement where blended learning methodologies are used and higher levels of student retention in fully distant courses.

#### **2. Pedagogical considerations:**

*“Teachers need to be able to bring the classroom into the computer.”*

- Sigurlaug Kristmannsdóttir, Verzlunarskóli Íslands, Reykjavik

Teachers working within the online environment need to have a clear understanding of the pedagogy underpinning all classroom practice and choices in both their real and virtual classrooms. Teachers need to become artists within the virtual classroom – using the creativity and flexibility of the online environment to create a sense of dynamic interaction. Only accomplished educators should be allocated classes in an online environment; those able to transfer their understanding of good practice in the real classroom into the virtual environment. Teachers should be prepared for the additional initial effort required to develop an exemplar online course. Teachers of online courses need to be able to look at content and consider the available methodologies to promote learning and then develop the material as appropriate. School leaders should never place teachers into the virtual environment who lack a clear understanding of good pedagogy, especially if such allocation is chosen as a solution to recurrent classroom management issues.

#### **3. The teaching & learning environment**

*“Online teaching has radically and gloriously changed my teaching.”*

Once a teacher has understood the pedagogical framework associated with web-based learning, the targeted construction of the teaching and learning environment is a key consideration. The online teacher needs to replicate the dynamics and strength of the physical classroom in their virtual class environment. At its best, a web course is able to combine the advantages of independent learning and classroom teaching. The online teaching and learning environment should provide the possibility to learn, while at the same time allowing the students themselves to take responsibility for using the environment effectively.

#### **4. Course format**

Good instructional design is a pre-requisite to success in the online environment. Students will flounder if an online course is just a list of tasks to be progressively completed. There is a need for courses to engage the student, through a diverse use of interactive media elements. Consistent use of embedded video and audio components in particular can significantly enhance the interaction between teacher and student. Induction processes are important in establishing an online community supporting a particular course. The use of a common course interface, along with consistent templates and style guidelines within courses, can all contribute to establishing familiarity for students in a virtual classroom. Students need to be proficient with the selected Learning Management System and any other course infrastructure supporting the delivery of an online course.

### **5. The role of staff**

*"A web course without a teacher is like an empty classroom with a pile of handouts left on the desk for the students."* Marianna Leikomaa & Hanna Torp, Tampere Polytechnic, Finland

The selection of staff for teaching within an online program is closely linked to student success. Experience would suggest that while all staff can be expected to incorporate blended learning methodologies into their classes, only highly accomplished classroom teachers should be allocated courses in the virtual environment. Highly accomplished teachers are better placed to understand the pedagogical shift required to move their active and dynamic real classroom into the virtual environment.

### **6. Staff Training**

A well developed online program requires a willingness among staff to engage in a significant and on-going level of professional development. Exemplar programs might include staff training delivered via online methodologies. Staff need to be aware that there will be an initial and significant additional preparation load when involved in online course delivery. This will be compensated in time by well-developed courses that need minimal adjustment from year to year.

### **7. Student qualities**

Students contemplating taking online courses need to have a high level of resilience, diligence and commitment to independent learning. Goal oriented students are significantly more suited to the online environment, than those without the self-drive to achieve. Some students are particularly suited to fully distance modes, while others would learn best via blended modes. The age of students is also clearly a significant factor in successful completion of courses, as was their understanding of the pedagogy and methodology of a virtual learning environment. Students need to take clear ownership of their learning and view active participation in the virtual class community as a significant part of any online course.

### **8. The strength of the online community surrounding a course**

*"Teachers need to be very visible to the students in the virtual community."*

Success in the online environment clearly requires a very visible class environment, even if virtual. The time taken to induct students into a course, along with a recurrent focus on developing a distinct and positive class environment, would appear to significantly influence student learning outcomes and the retention rates of those studying totally online courses. Students need to feel secure, confident and not isolated within the online environment.

#### **9. The technology and infrastructure used**

Teachers working in the virtual environment need to feel confident in the technical side of web-based learning. Online pedagogy requires a stable networked environment, where teachers have justifiable confidence in the ability of the technology to handle the requirements of online learning. Teachers need to be proficient in technical aspects of specific Learning Management Systems used within their class environment. The Infrastructure needs to support a model that involves the teacher as the active developer of lesson specific content delivered via a student-centred portal within a stable learning management system.

#### **F. Conclusion**

A model that involves accomplished teachers, with an appreciation for the potential of IT in the classroom, matched with strong competency in IT, able to bring the strength of their real classroom into the virtual sphere, emerged as a highly successful exemplar. Such a model is relevant to both blended and distance environments. This approach, supported by comprehensive well-developed, web-based online content and delivered through the use of a student-centred portal, within a stable learning management system, provides the most viable model for easily integrated use of online learning.