



MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga

Effective practice for e-learning

Designing for support

How do we support learners?

‘Learning supports’ are the interactions that help learners to complete their learning activities. While educators have key support roles, learning supports also include those provided by libraries, learning skills centres, technical services, peers and workplace colleagues, and the activities and resources that scaffold learning.

The quality of support for learners varies significantly across the sector. The systems provided by many libraries are good examples of successful learning supports.

Consider three elements of learning supports when you design a course. You should:

1. design with an understanding of your learners (social and peer support)
2. design mechanisms to support effective teaching (academic and task support)
3. design for effective use of technology (technical support).

1. Design with an understanding of your learners

What does the research say?

New learners have a range of attitudes, skills, and understandings that will both help them to progress, and create barriers for them in e-learning.

As well as understanding these background factors, organisations and their staff need to be aware of prospective learners’ levels of information and technical literacy. Even before they enrol, learners who are considering learning online will benefit from relevant and timely information that will prepare them for online study.

There are many ways in which organisations can actively promote the characteristics of effective online learning.

Learners need support to build:

- motivation and confidence
- time-management skills and the ability to set goal
- commitment to study
- reading and literacy skills
- technical literacy skills.

Learners tend to dislike e-learning if they are inexperienced, unable to cope with self-directed learning, or regard technology as a barrier between them and their learning.

Family support (that of partners, children, and influential others) is particularly important to Pacific families. Families can provide encouragement and understanding of what learners need to do to succeed.

What does this mean in practice?

- Assess learner readiness for e-learning, including attitudes and technical skills.
- Provide orientation programmes that help learners understand their own needs for social/personal, task/academic, and technical support.
- Design and plan remedies to address skill gaps and lack of confidence.
- Provide opportunities for face-to-face advice and for trialling the e-learning environment before courses start.
- Introduce learners early to the delivery mode and structure of their programme, any specific study requirements, information and communication technology (ICT) and e-learning skills.
- Provide accurate information about the time, effort, and commitment learners need to successfully complete the course.
- Include learners' wider families in orientation programmes (this may be particularly important for Pacific learners).
- Provide course links to generic information, learning centres, and specific library and learning resources.
- Help learners to develop the skills they need to be independent learners.
- Encourage learners to think reflectively.
- Encourage peers and mentors to provide feedback and to engage in conversation.

2. Design mechanisms to support effective teaching

What does the research say?

Educators and learning designers should consider learning support as the 'glue' that holds the learning activities and learning resources together for the learner.

As well as interacting with educators and other learners in their cohort, online learners need to communicate with administrative and academic staff before and during courses.

Good design, development, and presentation of course materials enhance learning by motivating learners to engage with the content, and inspiring them to complete their study.

Effective experiential and relevant teaching strategies use and validate learners' own experiences, and create points for discussion.

When they use a formal e-learning design process, educators have a structure that encourages holistic thinking about the desired course outcomes and the relationships between course structure, resources, activities, and assessments. This process also helps to clarify any learner and educator expectations that could challenge success. During the design process, educators need to think strategically about how they design teaching and learning time so that they and their learners use their time effectively.

What does this mean in practice?

- Identify individual staff members as points of contact for specific roles (for example, you might have a course educator, a coordinator, an administrator, and liaison library or learning skills staff).
- Develop blended courses that integrate a range of teaching modes and experiences (new online learners are more likely to accept online components when they are combined with more familiar teaching modes).

- Design opportunities for interaction (examples include face-to-face meetings, lectures and tutorials; online discussion forums; synchronous chat; and other interactive and collaborative applications).
- Design explicit support for communication between learners and administrative staff and educators before and during the course – don't leave it to chance.
- Present information in a format that's appropriate to both the message and the learner.
- Present the same materials differently according to learners' needs.
- Use supports within learning activities (such as supports can be collaborative settings, authentic workplace activities, buddies and mentors).
- Provide clear instructions and well-scaffolded activities.
- Use supports within learning resources (such as supports may be templates or checklists).
- Separate learning activities and learning resources so both can be independently updated, modified, customised, and reused.
- Scaffold those learners who have a high initial degree of dependency to enable them to become independent learners.
- Provide timely feedback on assignments and, as far as possible, respond to individual needs.
- Respond to learner feedback about the course.

3. Design for effective use of technology

What does the research say?

Learners regard technical help as the most important support for online learning. They need access to reliable ICT systems and technical help that's relevant, easily understood, and available when they need it. Technology that's not robust frustrates learners, and reduces the likelihood of them engaging with the content and completing their course. Clear, accurate information about the course, infrastructure, and technical support also enhances learner retention.

Learners need to be motivated and to receive ongoing support if they are to participate fully in e-learning activities.

Supporting online learners

The Eastern Institute of Technology's Bachelor of Viticulture and Bachelor of Wine Science degrees are offered both on campus (face to face) and off campus (as blended online and block courses).

The faculty developed the blended option to meet the needs of the growing number of potential students who were unable to attend the campus-based course. But faculty were initially concerned that online students would struggle to engage and succeed, and that the practical components of the course could not be delivered online.

The comprehensive design work undertaken before the first papers were delivered took these concerns into account. A mandatory 3-day orientation course brought students together – they were able to not only meet course teachers and undertake field trips; they also trialled the learning management system in a supportive and constructive environment. They were introduced to services such as the library, learning skills, bookshop, IT helpdesk, disability support, and the Students Association. They were also able to establish social relationships within their cohort before they started their online study. In the online environment, social and help forums allowed students to continue their mutual support, guided by their teachers.

Once in each semester (May and October), the students come back to the Taradale campus to complete field work and other face-to-face components for their papers. They sit their exams in locations as close as possible to where they live – usually at other institutes of technology, polytechnics, or universities.

Feedback from the first group of students has been extremely positive. They appreciate the flexibility of distance learning combined with the supports implemented by the institution, the support shown by teachers, and the mutual support they derive from their peers. Students say they know their fellow students better than they would in a large class on campus. Academic success rates for the first semester are high.

When educators choose a technology, they need to think about the systems they can control and those they can't. There continues to be a tension between keeping course sites and materials simple (so they are accessible and easy to use) and wanting to use applications that use large bandwidth, or may not be compatible with other hardware or software. Well-informed technical advice and support are crucial, but they must serve the pedagogy – not dictate it.

What does this mean in practice?

- Provide robust technical systems and sound, up-to-date information about them to reduce the possibility of technical challenges causing frustration.
- Provide accurate information about the course and the infrastructure learners will need to access the course – both on and off campus.
- Provide opportunities for learners to trial the course environment before the course starts.
- Provide clear information about who learners should contact for technical support and when that support is available.
- Choose technology that is established and proven for the particular purpose.

This bulletin is based on the following research reports:

Clayton, J., & Elliott, R. (2007). *E-learning activities in Aotearoa/New Zealand industry training organisations*.

Clayton, J., & Elliott, R. (2008). *Overview of work-based and work-placed e-learning landscapes*.

Koloto, A., Kaotanga, A., & Tatila, L. (2006). *Critical success factors for effective use of e-learning by Pacific learners*.

Jeffrey, L., Atkins, C., Laurs, A., & Mann, S. (n.d.). *Learning profiles: Diversity in learning*.

Koloto, A., Kaotanga, A., & Tatila, L. (2006). *Critical success factors for effective use of e-learning by Pacific learners*.

Marshall, S. (2006). *E-learning maturity model version two: New Zealand tertiary institution e-learning capability – informing and guiding e-learning architectural change and development*. Project report.

LDnet is New Zealand's support network for learning designers.

For more details, go to <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/communities/ldnet>