

Engaging students online: “E ako!”

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Patai: How can I use technology to support my classroom teaching for students who can't attend my classes? Some of my students care for whānau, and some hold part-time jobs and can't always attend the classes I provide on campus for them. I post my notes online for them, but I want to provide something more dynamic and engaging for them online.

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Response

Recognising your students' needs is a good starting point for planning and developing more flexible learning opportunities that enable them to balance life and study. Our students, especially Māori/Pacific are often called to face whānau responsibilities as a matter of priority, and it is great if there is a flexible study option enabling them to keep up with their study amidst other demands.

Flexible learning opportunities can be interactive, encouraging students to engage with the topic, with you, the teacher, and possibly with each other, in a stimulating and dynamic learning community. Such a communal approach and sense of belonging in a community—a cultural norm—will be well received by the Māori/Pacific students. Our use of the term ‘e-ako’ implies active engagement in the learning environment. Key components for such environments are depicted in this ‘community of inquiry model’ (Figure 1) where social presence is accorded as much significance as the cognitive and teaching presence in the learning environment.

The ‘community of inquiry’ model was developed to inform the facilitation of an online community of learning mainly through discussion forums. However, its principles can be adapted in any technology integrated teaching approach. You do have to balance the provision of content online (e.g. notes) with opportunities for student engagement (e.g. through discussion forums) to motivate your students to become a part of a dynamic learning community.

If your students need access to learning opportunities and learning resources anywhere any time, there are a number of steps you can take to address this:

1. Review what other elearning resources have already been developed in your subject area, for students at the same level as yours. You may find something that you can use as is, depending on what you're looking for. A good place to start could be an online repository such as MERLOT,¹ a US-based multimedia educational resource for learning and online teaching. For secondary level teachers, New Zealand Maths², Social Sciences Online and English Online³ are digital repositories of discipline-based online teaching resources available from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Te Kete Imurangi⁴, research reports and information about the re-use and re-purposing of Open Educational Resources (OERs) at universities in the UK can be found on the JISC Open Educational Resources infokit website.⁵

¹ MERLOT: <http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>

² NZ Maths: <http://nzmaths.co.nz/>

³ English Online and Social Sciences Online: <http://englishonline.tki.org.nz/>; <http://ssol.tki.org.nz/>

⁴ Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) Ministry of Education website: <http://www.tki.org.nz/>

⁵ JISC Open Educational Resources Infokit: <https://openeducationalresources.pbworks.com/w/page/24838330/OER%20Use%20and%20Reuse>

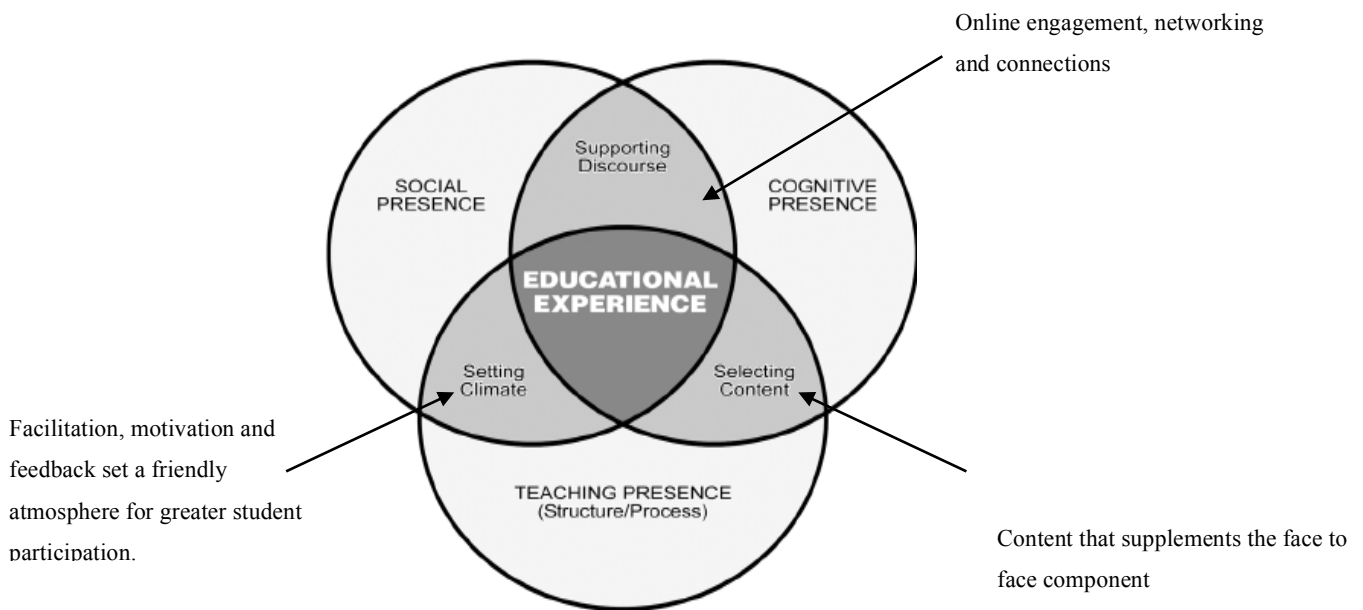


Figure 1: The different factors that influence an online community of learning (Adapted from Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000)

2. Check for resources that might be relevant to special requirements for your target group. For example, if you have Māori students then you might want to learn more on Māori education through Ministry of Education website⁶. Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga has a sophisticated site at <http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/>
3. Think about your course; its strengths and weaknesses. Do the learning outcomes need to be reviewed? What do your peers and students have to say about it? What sorts of learning experiences (online and face-to-face) would best serve the intended learning outcomes? Because building a website will take a considerable investment of effort, take the time to reflect on what might be involved so that you avoid beginning something that may have inherent problems. For example, these are some options to consider for online development:
 - online tutorials that will present topics or quizzes in interactive ways
 - an online discussion forum to ask you or other students questions or share references or ask for feedback
 - a social network to ‘hang out’ with other students and feel part of a learning community
 - a course website containing resources, references, links, images and information to supplement the course notes
 - videos or animations to explain a particular process
 - a virtual field trip or demonstration of a lab experiment to participate or preview something online before a particular session or excursion
 - What security and copyright issues do you need to be aware of?
4. Think about your students; what do you expect they will do with the learning opportunities and resources you provide for them? Conducting a ‘needs analysis’ would reveal whether they have the computer and internet access they need to use the learning resources you plan to

⁶ http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/MaoriEducation/AboutMaoriEducation.aspx_or_others

develop for them. You could survey your students to get a better idea of what they think would work for them. A focus group approach may be more appropriate for addressing the needs of a particular target group such as Māori/Pacific.

5. How much time are you able to devote to developing a new online learning resource or service for your students? Try to get an estimate of how long it will take to build the necessary resources. Do you need to apply for funding to pay for some assistance with the development work required? Do you want to spend time online once the resource is available to your students, moderating forums, keeping the content fresh and current, participating in discussions or maintaining a bank of frequently asked questions (FAQs)? Or once you have finished preparing the material do you want the resource to “run itself”? The ‘SECTIONS’ model proposed by Bates and Poole (2003) offers a simple and succinct framework of such consideration that one can use when planning to develop online learning resources. Be aware too that designing a self-sustaining resource may sound ideal in terms of your own work load, but it does have some potential risks too. This brings us to the next point.
6. Discuss your ideas and plans with elearning experts (or ‘learning designers’) who can advise on the best technologies to suit your course and your students’ learning requirements. Learning designers typically work in central or faculty-based academic development units in tertiary institutions. They can work with you to develop elearning resources. Using this team-based approach to develop your elearning resources, they provide the know-how regarding the project development process, which elearning tools are best suited to different learning requirements, and how to actually use these tools, while you provide the expertise regarding the pedagogy and course material.
7. Producing a prototype to test with your students and get feedback from peers is an excellent exercise to check your assumptions about your students, your course, and about how long online resources can take to build, test and complete. This prototyping process is well represented in the ‘ADDIE’ model of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation of elearning as explained by Mark Nichols in his e-Primer Series; in particular E-Primer #3 on Designing for eLearning (Nichols, 2010). The usefulness of rapid prototyping (Tripp & Bichelmeyer, 1990) for web-based content is regarded by some as an alternative form of learning design where you get more detailed information on your learners, the content and how engagement ensues while you are developing and testing the new online learning resource.

Be warned! Taking time to explore how learning technologies can support your course can throw a whole new light on your approach to teaching, and yield unexpected surprises about how your students learn. It can be very rewarding and also extremely time consuming—depending on your requirements. With careful planning, regular reality checks with your peers and students, and a team approach with elearning experts, the time invested upfront will be well worth the investment. You may even find yourself asking: “how did I ever teach without this?” Diana Laurillard sums up the challenge:

The academic world has called each new technological device...into the service of the transmission model of learning. The potential of the technology to serve a different kind of learning cannot be exploited by an academic community that clings only to what it knows. (2002, p. 20)

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