

Students come first: blended learning in a distributed model - an interview with Donelle Batty

Jo: Welcome to the Knowledge Tree everyone. Today we're speaking with Donelle Batty who is a high school teacher from Riverside in Launceston, Tasmania. Donelle is a grade supervisor teaching face-to-face within the Riverside High School but she also works within the Distance Education Tasmania Online Campus as a very experienced teacher and professional mentor for other teachers within that campus, which runs across the whole state of Tasmania. This is an edited version of a phone interview conducted as part of the evaluation of the Distance Education Online Campus Service. Thanks for speaking with us Donelle. Can you give us a quick run down please of your students... where they are and the programs that you teach them?

Donelle: I teach Child Studies to grades 9 and 10 and there's some grades 7s and 8s from Cape Barren island are doing that, and I do Children Services Certificate II in Community Services Work which is grade 11 and 12 VET and I have one called the Pegasus Project which is for grades 7 and 8 Gifted and Talented students across the state.

Jo: And your receiver schools?

Donelle: I do Child Studies to start with. OK I have Flinders' Island, Cape Barren Island, Triabunna, Woodbridge, Bothwell, St Mary's and Rosebery. Now for VET, I have St Helen's, Glenora, Triabunna, Sorell, Huonville, Sheffield, St Mary's as well and Winnaleah and then for Pegasus I have Reece High School, Brooks, Geilston Bay, Lilydale, Burnie, Rosetta, Woodbridge, Bothwell, Riverside, Taroon, right so that's all my schools.

Jo: So how many students do you have in each of those schools?

Donelle: It ranges from one to about five. There's thirty-four students enrolled at the moment in Pegasus.

Jo: And what about in the other two programs?

Donelle: In the other two programs, in Child Studies I think there's about thirty-three I just have to check.

Jo: And is that including your VET?

Donelle: No VET's different, so for Child Studies I have thirty-three and for VET yes seventeen.

Jo: OK, so what would your perceptions be of your students' employment prospects for a start?

Donelle: Well my perception is that the kids really enjoy it ...

Jo: Yeah

Donelle: And it actually allows the students to have a greater choice of subjects in those schools and allows access to something they wouldn't have access to if it was not offered through online.

Jo: OK, and how would you rate the impact of it?

Donelle: I think it's highly significant.

Jo: OK

Donelle: And for some it allows them to follow a career path because Child Studies is actually a career path ...

Jo: Yeah

Donelle: ...they can work out where they can go with that for later on

Jo: So what about your perception on students' life skills

Donelle: OK

Jo: Like what significance do you think that has?

Donelle: Student life skills (the impact on) is exceptionally high because they learn how to operate in an online environment and in online communities. Let's face it; our world revolves around online life in a lot of cases. Everyone uses email in their workplace well not everyone but the majority of people are using it more and more and at home as well for communicating with friends and family members if they are overseas and it's getting used more and more. Yeah so I see it really vital because it gives them the skills and confidence for them to be able to do that effectively and just understanding how to use discussions...discussion boards and how that works because even now you have online conferences and if you go out to the university you'll find that they use WebCT, so having some understanding of how WebCT works and how to be part of the community before you get to the uni would be really valuable.

Jo: Yes, basic online etiquette and that sort of thing

Donelle: Yes that sort of thing is really important and the safety and the etiquette for someone who is going onto university is really worthwhile. In the online environment you get the text and kids are known for changing their persona in different environments, in the online area, as do adults and you have to be very aware of, that some child that is very timid may actually be quite able to be forthright in the online environment because they don't have to physically be in front of a group of people, so it allows them to come out and say things that they may not say otherwise.

Jo: So Donelle, what are the main issues you find in your professional development role with new online teachers?

Donelle: I had a conversation with a teacher the other day and she said, 'Look I'm giving up on the pretty stuff because the most important is the teaching... that's my core business' and I said, 'That's correct it is your core business and so you've got to focus on that' and so, I think when probably people go into it for the first time, it's almost like being a brand new teacher...

Jo: Yeah

Donelle: ...you walk in and you see some people in the school, who are these amazing teachers who don't seem to be troubled by a thing and you're on this really steep learning curve. For someone who is coming in brand new it's all there and it hits them really fast and it's like 'What do I need to know?' and often because they haven't taught in that area they don't know the questions to ask, for new teachers, and if you don't ask questions people assume you're OKbut that's my assumption

Jo: Yeah OK

Donelle:..like if someone keeps quiet you assume until you get some feedback from somewhere else that you're not getting work, or whatever, it's just like a normal classroom you're working in isolation from everyone else

Jo: Yeah

Donelle: ...so people don't start to realise there are issues there until other people start making comments and I think that's very much a teaching profession thing and some people are too scared to ask for help because they don't want to be seen as not knowing,

Jo: Yep

Donelle: Whereas I just ask dumb questions [laughs] I'll say 'Here comes the dumb question of the day...'

Jo: Yeah, yep

Donelle: [laughing]'...I know I've been shown this but I can't remember'. I suppose that also takes enough confidence as well.

Jo: So Donelle, you've got an awful lot of schools... how does the face-to-face component come into it because I understand you're running a blended program?

Donelle: When we visit students we put in a fair amount of effort with those kids on that day. I actually, usually I take them for an entire day of activity when I visit them and when we visit them we usually go to the site.

Jo: Yeah

Donelle: We spend time with the students and when you've got fifteen schools I had Bothwell and Woodridge come together on the one day and that was a really good thing. When I go to Flinders Island, Cape Barren Island will fly over to Flinders.

Jo: So it's about getting the schools to do residential stuff or bring kids together...

Donelle: Together, yeah VET..it's different because it's a nationally credited course so you have to be very careful with your assessment there so I'll be spending about half a day there with each student discussing their understandings of that course and I have to be happy as to whether or not they are able to be assessed appropriately and I know that they really enjoy the days when I visit them, they absolutely love those days. For the majority of students I've had in the courses have always been really happy with what they're doing. The feedback I'm getting about the VET course is really good and also I'm getting that with the Child Studies courses as well in most cases.

Jo: Yep.

Donelle: But you see that's the key, if the support from the support teacher isn't there. If they're not saying 'So-and-so is struggling with this, how else can I do it?', then that's where it can fall down. It depends how the school at the other end sets it up. Like Queenstown sets it up like a line, so there's one teacher with 24 or 26 kids and they're all doing online courses, that's an online classroom. But you see I expect the teachers who are supporting me actually go into my course and read what I'm asking the kids to do.

Jo: *So a two-way exchange going on all the time?*

Donelle: Yeah so that exchange is happening there.

Jo: *It's about explaining what a co-facilitation model is?*

Donelle: mmm

Jo: *and outlining those expectations clearly and all that sort of thing*

Donelle: Yeah. At Riverside High School, it's not a rural school it's in Launceston, so it has, it's impacted by online learning with the Pegasus Project. We've had students it that for two years now.

Jo: *Yep*

Donelle: And last year we couldn't provide a student with French so she went in and did French online and that was really positive. She did that as an extra so she did all her normal subjects plus that.

Jo: *Yep*

Donelle: ...and came out of one subject for one lesson every week to do her French and then her parents supported her at home by finding a tutor to talk with, so that was really good and that allowed her then to do French later on and follow through with her career path because she wants to go overseas and teach English as a Second Language so that's her aim and the knowledge of other languages is important to her so that allowed that to occur.

Jo: *So what about your receiver schools?*

Donelle: I would presume that would be very high (impact)...

Jo: *OK so*

Donelle: ...simply because when you're looking at somewhere like Flinders (Island), I've got six or so kids doing that and there's not many kids in the high school. So it's quite high, the impact there, and they're also doing other (online) stuff. Then you've got Cape Barren Island and all the kids are logged into it so they're talking about it and it's part of their, you know, it does, it gets home and that sort of thing... so I'd say it's quite high in those other places and because what happens is the kids are involved in it and they start making friendships with kids from other schools and that gets talked about and that would be discussions held at home so you could say it's quite high. But it may not be the course content, although I do actually ask my students to go home and ask questions about, from their parents about, themselves when they were babies and stuff like that, so they're actually engaging their family in their learning, because they need to find out stuff about themselves and also what it was like for Mum to be pregnant and what it was like for Dad to cope with it, so that sort of thing happens in my course.

Jo: *Yeah*

Donelle: But basically a lot of kids would talk about the relationships that they're building within the courses, because that the thing they love, the fact that they get to meet other people.

Jo: *What's your perception then of how it contributes to community development?*

Donelle: I think it's a real positive one

Jo: *So that would be highly significant or significant?*

Donelle: Highly significant

Jo: *Yep. So what about how you think parents view the service in terms of a. whether they're involved as adult learners themselves or b. whether they're involved as supporting parents or non-supporting parents whatever?*

Donelle: The adults that I have in VET they would view it high because otherwise they wouldn't be able to do the course

Jo: *Yep*

Donelle: So they wouldn't be able to do something that takes them onto a pathway that they want to get work in

Jo: *What's your perception of parent support for students overall doing online programs?*

Donelle: I've never had any negative feedback. In fact I've had positive feedback so I'd say highly significant.

Jo: *OK, and what about parent's perception of the program and how it impacts on the school standing within the community?*

Donelle: I think it would have a high impact simply from the perspective that it says to them that their school is allowing their child to have lots of opportunities, and they're not being disadvantaged by the place that they live in. I think that is the absolute key to all of it, is the fact that it's providing students an even playing field, no matter where they live and that's exceptionally important.

Jo: *So what about the wider community? So this is outside of parents, this is community generally around the school perceives the future employment prospects of people involved in it*

Donelle: Actually no I'd like to say it would be high because most of the kids – well on Flinders the kids get involved in going to the day-care centre and stuff like that. It is very dependable on the school you're delivering to and whether they've got community links and whether they're using those links to enhance the course. So for instance I'm about to send out an email to all my Child Studies teachers to say to them... 'Between now and the end of Term 2 can you please organise if possible a visit to a hospital to see a birthing room and to see the bathing room, to see a baby bathed and all that sort of thing... and can you organise a visit from a breastfeeding association person to talk about breastfeeding and bring a baby in and show them what it's like to breastfeed' and that will really depend on the school and whether the person who's there, follows up and does it. You know it's a different skill to other teachers, you're actually dealing with things from a different perspective because in your face-to-face class teacher role you are dealing with just your students, and if someone acts up and isn't doing the right thing da de da de da..., then you'll put in place a number of behavioural management strategies. If they don't work then you go to the next step and talk to the grade coordinator and that sort of thing, whereas in the situation with an online class, if I have bullying and harassment that occurs then I'm dealing with two different schools, usually, and I'm discussing the issue with the

student and the support teachers of two different schools and so it's actually different to normal in class...

Jo: *Yes of course it is, the discipline*

Donelle: ...behaviour management. Yeah, I don't have little Johnny who's throwing a rubber around [laughs] or whatever ...but it's more communication...

Jo: *Negotiation and stuff like that...*

Donelle: ...with other people required for the course to occur.

Jo: *So a high level of negotiation skills...*

Donelle: Yeah you're actually requiring a teacher who has exceptional communication skills, who is able to negotiate and discuss things from a different perspective. You might have thirty students and you have seven different teachers to communicate with, plus your thirty students or you might have only three teachers, so the paperwork is bigger than the normal teaching classroom. Within the school I'm really lucky, I have my own office and my own phone and you know I got my own computer before most people did because I put my hand up to be a Grade Coordinator because I saw that by being a Grade Coordinator I get my own office, my own phone and my own computer and therefore I can actually run my (online) classes better. So I really think one of the resources that is identified is that you actually have your own office and that's because you are teaching. Being involved in a normal school also means that you're involved in normal school activities and sometimes you've got clashes of timetables, calendars with schools as in you know this school might have their athletics carnival and you might also have your athletics carnival but they're all on different days so that can sometimes interrupt keeping in contact with students. If carnival day's on a Thursday but my online day's on a Thursday I still have commitment at the schools that I teach at. It is, it's not like distance education where all those teachers work at the one site, so it's very different because your working in other schools.

Jo: *OK, so the advantages of the blended model over the face-to-face model?*

Donelle: The advantages of the blended model, I think the advantage is that the students are working with more than one teacher, so they can ask questions to more than one teacher. They actually, they are getting more suppose one-on-one time really aren't they?

Jo: *I recon so, I think that's why it succeeds a lot of the time, because people actually do get to feel like they have a real one-on-one relationship with you as a person, as opposed to be an authority figure for example.*

Donelle: Yeah and that's the other thing is that they don't call me Ms Batty. They call me by my first name so, and I treat, I tell them it's a learning environment, in a learning community and we're learning together. So I think that's probably the key there, is the fact that it's not a real classroom, so they don't have those issues that some kids bring to a normal classroom and they're able to, well, for instance, there was one child she's moved from her school now and is not in the course, but she was a school refuser, but she would get in a course at home. So it actually enabled her to engage when she would probably find it more difficult at times to engage and also it's the fact that they're mixing with other people from other schools that's most important.

Jo: *What about additional benefits and some particular skills that blended learning brings?*

Donelle: I think it actually increases their communication skills because the simple fact is that kids will get there and say 'I can't do..., I need help, I don't understand it', and I simply send them an email back saying 'Well you need to tell me exactly what you don't understand and where you need help, because I need to know that before I can help you'. So it actually causes them to think more carefully about what they're communicating and I think that's the key for the future as well because we are a society that's going to evolve more around jobs that involve really clear communication and jobs that haven't been created yet and those will include a lot of communication that doesn't necessarily happen face-to-face.

Jo: *And arguments for all students having access to an online or blended experience as part of a broader education.*

Donelle: Well I think they should [laughs], no questions asked [laughs]. I just think they should simply because it gives them a better understanding of the world they're living in and it prepares them better for later on. The reality is that of no matter what workplace you go into you are going to be dealing with different situations and if we can give them more experiences now, where they are put into different situations, isn't that a better thing for later on? It gives them more experiences and it allows them to be more comfortable with new experiences. To give them the chance to be part of that, now, is really important. And the other thing is that you can set up group work with kids from different schools and that simulates situations where...you know ...I'm in... I work with people in Hobart and people here, people on Flinders Island and Cape Barren Island so it's giving them reality in their learning.

Jo: *Yeah. Thanks heaps, Donelle.*

Donelle: OK Bye.

Jo: *See you. Bye*