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## Chapter VIII

# Online Learning for the Real World: Diploma in Computing Via the Internet

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines usability evaluation in the context of the Diploma in Computing via the Internet offered by the University of Oxford Department for Continuing Education and, to some extent, its on-site course partner. This ongoing online course is aimed at adult non-university (the “real world” of the chapter title) students. The chapter follows the usability evaluation process through the life cycle of course development, delivery and maintenance, analysing the requirements and actions of each stage and how they were implemented in the course. It also discusses how pedagogical evaluation must be considered as part of this process, as well as the more obvious software considerations, and how this was achieved within the course. Finally it draws some conclusions concerning the enhancements to course usability of the virtual classroom and how this atypical evaluation material can and should be integrated into an overall usability evaluation picture.*

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching computing by distance learning is not a novelty and, in some ways, the subject lends itself to such treatment in its study of logical concepts such as algorithms. However, in others, an isolated student suffers the same difficulties as an occasional home PC user: through the use of software (and programming languages) in a way that can encourage the problematic without support. It is interesting to compare the experience of classroom computing teaching and find that, even with support, students can find actual computer use daunting. The development and practice of usability evaluation within such an online course would therefore need to focus not only on its interface and content presentation but also its pedagogical effectiveness. This chapter examines the experience of adult non-university (the “real world” of the chapter title) students in continuing education. It focuses on an ongoing online course in computing offered by the University of Oxford Department for Continuing Education and, to some extent, its on-site partner.

### The Online Course

The Diploma in Computing has been available on-site at the Department for Continuing Education since the early 90s and online (as the Diploma in Computing via the Internet) since 1999.

The course’s students come from all walks of life ranging from teachers to the retired, the unemployed, lawyers and even IT professionals. The learning goals for the course centre on a broad familiarity and confidence with all aspects of computing in keeping with a student body that very often has vocational motivation for studying, although this is not always the case.

The course has the following aims:

- To provide a systematic introduction to modern computing
- To put students in control of information technology
- To enhance career prospects in a key skill area
- To give an opportunity for employers to upgrade staff skills

The course itself:

- Involves two years’ distance learning using the latest Internet technology
- Includes an Oxford summer school experience
- Leads to the award of an undergraduate Diploma in Computing
- Carries CATS credit rating of 120 points at Level 2, meaning that the course can be used to count toward an undergraduate degree if you continue your study at another university (Level 2 is approximately equivalent to the second year of study on an undergraduate full-time degree course at a British university)

The dual status of the course, running face-to-face and through distance learning, provides a unique insight into the respective learning needs of students. Analysis of their learning experience, supported by rich data past and present, has

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