



Class for One

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ABSTRACT

How flexible is the teaching model within the Bachelor of Information Technology? We value our ability to accommodate a wide range of students; from school leavers to mature adults, from naïve computer users to students with considerable industry experience. We teach to lectures of 120, streams of 20, in project groups of 3. Can this flexible mode be extended to deliver a tailored class to a single student?

1. The Problem

In December 2001 we were approached by a student who wished to learn the COBOL programming language. Unfortunately we had stopped offering a course in COBOL in 1999, replacing it with a Visual Basic course. The student, Peter, is an analyst programmer for Inland Revenue, who have provided him with a Final Year Study Award which will allow him to learn COBOL and Java, complete his BIT (after several years part-time), and join their COBOL development team in Wellington at the end of 2002.

2. The Solution

Peter approached Dr Sam Mann about the possibility of learning COBOL and after enquiries were made it was established that this could be done through Janice Henderson, who used to teach the BIT COBOL course. Janice now works as Customer Contact Centre Manager at Otago Polytechnic's Business School.

Arrangements were made for this course of study to be considered as paper IT203, Applications Programming.

Between Peter and Janice a course has been established which meets Peter's learning requirements without taking up too much of Janice's time. Using textbooks borrowed from the Bill Robertson library, Janice planned the course and set four practical assignments and one report. They are using COBOL-85, which includes some structures not available in COBOL-74 but is similar enough to meet Peter's requirements. Finding a compiler and editor that were compatible with current software was problematical, but Peter ultimately selected the Fujitsu COBOL Suite for Windows. With minimal involvement from Janice, Peter has worked independently on his tasks and has almost completed the course.

Janice also found the experience to be worthwhile. Her contact with Peter consisted of the initial meetings, followed up with emails as required. She admires Peter for his achievement: "COBOL is a difficult language for students to learn, as it is so different from modern languages. It has helped that Peter is driven by need."

Within the structure of the BIT course, we have successfully delivered a 'class for one'. While we would not encourage a wide adoption of this approach, it was a valuable experience for all concerned, and an affirmation that the flexible approach can work at this level.

(See Garrett, P. (2002) A Student's Experience of a Class for One. (this volume)

