

Introduction: The e-Educator Training Module

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Abstract

This is the second issue of the Malaysian Journal of Distance Education devoted to aspects of the two phases of the e-Educator training project. The introduction to the December 2008 issue provides an overview of the project and its rationale. For the convenience of readers of this June 2009 issue this introductory article will again provide a brief outline of the project which began with phase one in 2005–2006 involving a collaboration between the University of Nottingham, UK and Beiwai Online at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China to develop a generic training module for tutors who support students on online courses. The rationale behind the decision to develop a generic module is briefly covered as well as the decision to develop this module with online tutors in China and then to pilot this with distance learning tutors in Malaysia in phase 2 of the project. This is followed by an introduction to the articles within Special Issue of this journal that covers the development process, some of innovative tools within the module and the research surrounding the development and implementation.

Abstrak

Ini adalah keluaran khas kedua Jurnal Pendidikan Jarak Jauh Malaysia menjurus kepada aspek-aspek fasa kedua projek latihan e-Educator. Pengenalan kepada keluaran Disember 2008 yang lepas memberikan pandangan keseluruhan projek dan rasionalnya. Untuk memudahkan pembaca bagi terbitan Jun 2009 ini, artikel pengenalan ini sekali lagi akan memberikan rumusan ringkas projek yang bermula dengan fasa satu pada 2005–2006 yang melibatkan kolaborasi antara University of Nottingham, UK dan Beiwai Online at Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China untuk membangun modul latihan generik untuk tutor yang menyokong pelajar di atas kursus atas talian. Rasional di atas keputusan untuk membangun modul bergenerik ini diulas dengan ringkas begitu juga keputusan untuk membangunkan modul ini dengan tutor atas talian di China dan kemudiannya membuat rintis kepada tutor Pendidikan Jarak Jauh di Malaysia dalam fasa kedua

projek. Ini diikuti dengan pengenalan kepada artikel-artikel yang diterbitkan dalam edisi khas jurnal ini yang merangkumi proses-proses pembangunan, beberapa alatan inovatif di dalam modul dan juga penyelidikan yang berkait dengan pembangunan dan pelaksanaan.

Introduction

This introduction provides an insight into the Sino-UK-Malaysia collaboration on the e-Educator project – a project that set out to conduct research and development into the creation of a much needed generic online module for the training of tutors who support online learners. It introduces the articles that are within this second of two Special Issue of the Malaysian Journal of Distance Education that introduce the e-Educator project.

Background and Rationale for the Module

Background

The School of Education, University of Nottingham (UoN), UK and Beiwai Online, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) Beijing, China were engaged during 2004–2006 on a collaborative project to develop materials for an online Masters in English Language Teaching (MA eELT) for teachers at tertiary level. Details of these Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded developments and the wider eChina-UK programme of which this project was only one part can be found at <http://www.echinauk.org/>.

Rationale

This is described in some detail in Introduction: The Rationale for a Generic Online Tutor Training Module (Joyes, 2008a) but a brief outline is presented here. A users needs analysis at Beiwai Online and research conducted into the views of 35 tutors who were currently supporting students who were teachers of English at the eight universities offering distance learning in Beijing, China (Wang, 2004) indicated that a ‘new’ approach to tutor training was needed. In essence this training needed to be experiential as few tutors had any experience of learning online themselves and additionally it needed to provide them with the ability to

analyse online learning contexts and tasks and make informed decisions about the nature of the support needed. The module was timely in that the research identified a need for continuing professional development and a willingness to research their own practice.

It is important to note that the pedagogic approach taken within the e-Educator module does not adopt a phase or stage model (Salmon, 2000, Lewis and Allan, 2005, Moule, 2007) in which it is assumed that all the learners need to progress through these stages for effective learning to occur. Nor does it assume that the focus on the training should be the support of an online discussion group. These approaches appear to assume that a social constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978) predominates online learning and in reality a wide range of pedagogic approaches can be utilised (HEFCE, 2004). As noted in Joyes (2008a):

There appears to be an assumption in training courses that all tutors need the same support, that all subject areas use the same pedagogic approach and that providing guidelines or rubrics is sufficient. (Joyes, 2008a, p.4)

The module's pedagogic approach was influenced by the global need for learners who are problem solvers rather than processors of information (Laurillard, 2007). It sought to raise the tutor's awareness of the need for a problem solving/ enquiry approach and enable them to experience this themselves and develop the capacity to support learners to work in the same way.

Phase One: Sino-UK Collaboration

The Continuing Professional Development Model

The first step was to decide upon the continuing professional development model and this is presented in an article in the December 2008 Special Issue (Joyes, 2008b). This describes the framework in which the tutors to be involved in the training were at the centre of the learning process. The aim was to provide the tutors with an experience of online working within the module. As a result of their understanding of the contexts in which they were working, together with their own personal needs, the intention was for them to prioritise their personal routes through the materials – an

online personal development planner (PDP) was to provide a structure to support their CPD focus. This diagnostic approach was to be continued throughout the module as the final assessment involved revisiting the PDP to evidence progress and to set targets for future professional development. The personalisation approach was coupled with opportunities to provide local announcements, guidance and materials to support transferability across contexts.

Developing the Curriculum

Once the outline pedagogic framework had been decided what was needed was a curriculum and then learning activities within this. Because we were working in a Chinese context and our partners were experienced in the delivery of online materials it seemed sensible to fully engage the Chinese online tutors in collaborative working with academics and learning technologists to develop the curriculum. The participatory design process adopted was the subject of the research reported in the article by Chen: *Researching the Participatory Design Process for e-Tutor Training Material Design*. This article adds to our understanding of the complexity of trying to fully involve potential users of the online materials in cross national and cross professional contexts and also of researching this area. The curriculum itself was divided into five broad areas or domains, these are Community, Empathy, Methodology (reflection), Cognitive aspects and Feedback and articles in the December 2008 Special Issue by Chen (2008), Hall (2008), Sinclair and McGrath (2008), Joyes (2008c) and Sorensen (2008) provide an explanation of the developments in these five areas together with a discussion of outcomes of the evaluation with the Malaysian tutors.

Exploiting the Technologies

The e-Educator module aimed to provide tutors an environment in which they met a range of tools that supported students in their learning. In addition online trainee tutors need to meet a range of tools that support them in reflecting upon their current practice and the e-Educator project set out to not only incorporate existing tools into the module but to develop some new ones. These developments are described in the article by Caley and Luong: *Online Learning Support Tools*.

Phase Two: Malaysia-UK Collaboration

The Background and Context

The e-Educator project was intended to be a generic module – one that could be used for training tutors of online learners in any context, i.e. any culture and any subject discipline. In order to achieve this, two key principles for reusability were incorporated into the design. These principles were personalisation, allowing learners to identify their priorities in learning, and localisation, allowing institutions to add/select materials for study within the module and add local study materials. In order to research the module and the feasibility of the design, a major six month study was carried out during 2007 at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.

The Research

The e-Educator project set out to design a module for the training of tutors of online learners that could be customised, i.e. personalised so that it could meet individual learner needs and localised so that it could adapted to meet local contexts. The article Investigating Malaysian tutors' perceptions of the e-Educator by Thang and Murugaiah explores the methodology and outcomes of this research. Two specific online reflective analytic tools were developed for use within the module. The first, the Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) was designed to support tutors in developing an awareness of the need for empathetic understanding in their online text based interactions with their students. The article, the Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) by Hall (2008) provides an outline of the research that was conducted within the pilot around this tool. The second, the Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT) was designed to provide a framework for tutors in the analysis of online learning activities and to support discussion around effective strategies for learner support. The article Tutors' perceptions of effective online pedagogy – The Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT) by Joyes provides a description of the tool, its use in the module as well as some findings from the evaluation within the Malaysian pilot.

Concluding Remarks

This Special Issue and the one in December 2008 has provided the opportunity for those involved with the project to provide their own perspectives of the value of this collaborative venture. The articles are a means of not only sharing these perspectives but of celebrating the collaboration. All of the e-Educator resources described within the articles were designed to run on the open source Moodle platform. A live demonstrator version of the module running in Moodle and the online tools can be accessed from the eChina-UK programme website www.echinauk.org.

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