

Investigating Malaysian Tutors' Perceptions of the e-Educator

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Abstract

The University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Foreign Studies University, China developed a module for training tutors of online learners - one that could be adapted for use in a variety of contexts. The module was piloted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang with eight staff members (six tutors and two local mentors). They undertook to work through the different units of the e-Educator module and complete all the e-Educator tasks required which include online forums and other online activities. They were also required to complete reflective blog entries at regular intervals. This paper will share the results of the four focus group interviews and the reflections of one of the tutors. The findings of the focus groups were analysed first and then triangulated with the reflections of the tutor to give a more holistic picture of the Malaysian experience. The findings revealed that the e-Educator module curriculum was perceived as highly relevant to the tutors and impacted on their personal and professional development, establishing a community of practice for the tutors involved. However, the extent to which it can be localised needs to be explored further.

Abstrak

University of Nottingham, UK dan Beijing Foreign Studies University of China telah membangunkan satu modul latihan untuk tutor kepada pelajar atas talian yang boleh diadaptasi untuk digunakan dalam konteks yang pelbagai. Modul ini telah dirintis di Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang dengan lapan kakitangan akademik (enam tutor dan

dua mentor). Mereka telah melihat beberapa unit modul e-Educator dan menyelesaikan tugas e-Educator yang diperlukan yang melibatkan forum atas talian dan aktiviti-aktiviti atas talian yang lain. Mereka juga perlu untuk melengkapkan blok refleksi pada tempoh-tempoh yang tertentu. Artikel ini berkongsi keputusan temu duga empat kumpulan fokus dan refleksi salah seorang daripada tutor. Dapatan kumpulan fokus pertamanya telah dianalisis dan kemudiannya disahkan dengan refleksi tutor untuk memberi satu gambaran holistik terhadap pengalaman Malaysia. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa kurikulum modul e-Educator dirasakan sangat bersesuaian kepada tutor dan memberikan kesan terhadap pembangunan diri sendiri dan profesional, yang mewujudkan satu komuniti yang bekerjasama antara tutor yang terlibat. Bagaimanapun, tahap yang ianya boleh digunakan untuk kegunaan tempatan perlu dikaji dengan lebih mendalam lagi.

Background

The context for this article is the e-Educator project within the e-learning International Sino-UK programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. This involved collaboration between The University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Foreign Studies University, China to develop a module for training tutors of online learners - one that could be adapted for use in a variety of contexts. The module was piloted at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. A fully functional demonstrator is provided as part of the e-Educator project case study on the eChina-UK programme website www.echinauk.org. This article appears in the second of two Special Issue of the Malaysian Journal of Distance Education that provides a comprehensive overview of this project.

The Malaysian pilot

The e-Educator project set out to develop an appropriate pedagogic approach that would be suitable for the training of online tutors anywhere in the world teaching on any course. The module was developed by experienced Chinese online tutors and UK academics and it was important to explore the following research question that was central to the project. Would the pedagogic approach adopted be suited to those working in

different subject areas, from different ethnic backgrounds in a different country to where the module had been designed? (Joyes & Wang, 2007). This paper explores the research approach and findings of the pilot of the e-Educator module at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It consciously uses the actual reactions to the module by the tutors involved in the pilot with a minimum of interpretation. The intention being to provide their perspectives.

Altogether eight staff members from USM took part in the pilot study from March to November 2007. Six tutors undertook to work through the different units of the e-Educator module and complete all the e-Educator tasks required which include online forum discussions and other online activities. They were also required to complete reflective blog entries at regular intervals. Two mentors from within USM were appointed to support them locally and they were also provided with a blog to record their reflections. In addition, two mentors from the University of Nottingham team provided online support. Five of the tutors were from the School of Distance Education and one from the School of Educational Studies, USM. Two from the School of Distance Education majored in Science (Biology and Chemistry), one in Mathematics, one in English as a Second Language (ESL) and one in Organisational Behaviour. The tutor from the School of Educational Studies was previously a Biology teacher. All except the ESL tutor possessed a PhD. Their experience of distance teaching ranged from one-and-a-half years to twenty-three years. All of them described their confidence in using Information Communication Technologies as three except for one that rated herself as 3.5 – this was on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 being low and 4 high. The ESL tutor had to support more than 1000 online students whereas the rest had to support between 100 and 300 students.

A series of four face-to-face workshops to support the pilot and to carry out research activities were planned at USM. The first workshop led by members of the UoN team and conducted in the third week of March 2007 was an induction and orientation session to introduce the e-Educator module, its structure and ways of working. The learning tools were also introduced. A focus group interview was conducted at the end of the first workshop to find out the tutors' preliminary reactions towards the module. From this point onwards the tutors worked through the module online.

They were also required to complete blogs after the first workshop and on completion of each unit, to reflect upon their experience and the relevance of the materials to their practice. They were also supported by a further three face-to-face workshops at USM. The second workshop was conducted two months later in the third week of May 2007. The main aims of the second workshop were to support work on Units 2, 3, and 4 or the 5 unit module and to introduce the Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT) that is used within the module to support the tutor's in considering effective strategies for supporting online learning (Joyes, 2008; 2009). A hands-on session was incorporated to enable the tutors to test out the LAAT. A questionnaire and a focus group interview were also conducted to give the tutors an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of Units 1 and 2 and to document background information about the tutors. A third workshop was conducted in the first week of August 2007. The intention of this workshop was to introduce Unit 5 and to capture the tutors' reactions to Unit 4 and their overall view of the module through a focus group interview. A final workshop to obtain the tutors' views on how to localise the module for local needs was conducted on the first week of November 2007 followed by the final focus group interview in the second week of November 2007. Questionnaires were also given to the students to elicit their responses on issues regarding empathy, one of the themes within the module (Hall & Hall, 2009). Finally, the tutors were asked to reflect on their experiences as an online tutor and to present these at a symposium at the University of Nottingham, Semenyih campus in December 2007.

This paper will share the results of the four focus group interviews and reflections of one of the six tutors. Each of the interviews lasted around one and a half hours. A semi-structured approach was used in interviewing the tutors. The questions for focus groups 2 to 4 were informed by an initial analysis of the blog entries. The interviewer who was the Malaysian Associate Researcher and mentor (M1) for the project asked the questions and allowed the tutors to provide their views freely with minimum intervention. Each focus group interview was audio recorded and transcribed. The findings were then analysed and triangulated with the reflections of one of the USM tutors involved in the pilot to provide a holistic picture of the Malaysian experience.

Findings of the Focus Group Interviews

Findings of Focus Group Interview 1 (FGI 1)

The findings revealed that the tutors were initially uncertain with regard to what the project was about as seen from the response below.

At first I thought we have to come up with our own module. Because like myself, we have various backgrounds so I thought I had to come up with my (own) management module. After you came, then we had a clearer picture. I think someone also thought that maybe we were asked to put a lot of things on the blog for the students but it was something different, just our comments on the blog (Tutor 6).

Thus, the first workshop was timely as it helped to clarify many of their doubts and put the tutors at their ease. This is indicated in the following responses.

All that we asked was explained quite clearly (at the workshop) (Tutor 2).

Just now I called M2 (the UoN mentor and workshop leader) and within three to five minutes, he briefed me through the highlights of yesterday. And he was there entertaining me. I appreciate that (Tutor 3).

He was very quick to respond to our emails and our S.O.S. messages when things are not working (at the workshop) (Tutor 5).

I'm very happy with G, C (UoN workshop leaders) and S (the interviewer and the Malaysian Associate Researcher) because you are so very friendly and we feel like just making friends so we are not intimidated and not scared to voice out what we feel and joke around at the same time (Tutor 4).

The comment by Tutor 4 is important to note as the research relied upon the tutors providing 'honest' feedback if the findings were to have internal validity or 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings further revealed that four of the tutors had previous experiences in research

projects and all the tutors showed a genuine interest to participate in the activities in the module. They further showed awareness of both the strengths and the weaknesses of their programme and looked forward to learning from the project, sharing the knowledge they learnt and participating in future collaborative work as indicated below.

As for me, for once I've never been in an international thing like this. When I had this opportunity to do some research with a foreign university, I was very glad. And the other thing is, more than that, I think is that the fact there is a lot of room for collaborative research, so many areas as I'm from an education background and this is all related to education and any pedagogical issue. I think that would be a very rich experience for me. As well as working along with anyone. Although we have been around but I don't think we've worked on a project like this. It's something I look forward to. And the project itself, I think it will teach me a lot. I'm keeping a very open mind, accepting and getting a lot of new information and knowledge (Tutor 5).

I am hoping that whatever I've learnt here would be able to convince our colleagues and I actually look forward to make a change, to change the way we run things because our curriculum is like 20 years old. I think it's time to change otherwise we'll be left behind (Tutor 4).

As far as the module is concerned, what I can see is the final product, maybe we can use it to train the other lecturers so that they will learn or know there are a lot more things that you have to do in supporting your students. You have to give them a lot of support and guide to make them go through, especially the induction period. And for us we'll be thinking how to improve ourselves as a distant learner tutor (Tutor 1).

Findings of Focus Interview 2, 3 and 4 (FGI 2, FGI 3, and FGI 4)

The findings revealed that the tutors at USM had received no pedagogic training and all the materials represented 'new' ideas to them. They found the materials very beneficial:

When we come to USM, OK, we were not even given any training, teacher training. Just do it. No theory, learning theories or whatever. You learn through experience (Tutor 4).

We don't have any teaching, you know... any education, you know... background. Not like teachers in teacher's training college (Tutor 6).

I also have no experience in teaching just reading from the articles what it is all about in learning. So from the e-Educator, at least I have something, something that I can rely, with learning style, teaching style or whatever. And then it gives me an opportunity to reflect on what I have done with my students (Tutor 6).

We were put in a student's shoes, trying to be a student and searching on the net using a certain time frame and come out with an article. So I think that was a very good experience as far as I am concerned, because it really makes you think of when you start giving your students work, you know, whether students are able to do it within that time... how to incorporate criticality in online teaching and online learning, which I found very good (Tutor 5).

For feedback and assessment, I like the activity, it gives us concrete examples of how to be a tutor in face-to-face, how to be a tutor in online... give us a good example of how to be a tutor, how to intervene, how to give feedback (Tutor 1).

However, the tutors pointed out some issues in the module that need to be rectified.

In unit 3, I wish that Likert scale is slightly extended for us to manoeuvre a bit, you know... this one where we are thinking that: "Oh yeah, I know this. Yeah, I am quite comfortable doing this", you know... after doing it to say that: "Yes, I am comfortable" (is difficult) I am more comfortable, but you know... how do I say it (Tutor 5).

The other thing is on self disclosure (it) is not really relevant to us or maybe we really understand the objective of self disclosure itself and the objective for each unit is like not really clear stated, so we don't really understand what this topic is made for and how to relate it to our learning and how to use it for (Tutor 6).

I mean, introduce something before we begin, but because in all the units we were just given tasks immediately, with introduction to the tasks rather than to the topic itself. But in unit 4, I think there was still no real explanation or objective to whatever you do... So, it would be nice if we have... especially for people who have not gone through those topics, you know... they don't know what is

community building, what are all those things, empathy and... so, it would be nice if you introduce (the topics) , so... then you know where you're going and what they're going to teach you (Tutor 2).

And then the (mentor) feedback should come at... after we finish (each part of the Unit). We are doing 4.5 and then they are asked about question 4.1. ... it should come in time, so that, you know... yes, and they're still fresh in our mind, we don't have to go back and let's think what have we done in 4.1 and go through our reflection and everything just to answer that (Tutor 1).

The tutors had very favourable opinions of the online tools within the module, for example, the Professional Development Planning tool - PDP (Joyes, 2008), Learning Activity Analysis Tool - LAAT (Joyes, 2009) and the Online Empathy Training Tool – OLETT (Hall & Hall, 2009).
Examples:

I think that (the Personal Development Planning unit) was quite good because it makes you aware of where you stand and to wake you up to see yourself. It's like a reflection. You see yourself in front of the mirror and say Oh, OK, this is how I am now (Tutor 5).

I feel this (the LAAT) to be crucial. The whole e-Educator is actually standing upon the foundation of activity theory. So bringing in LAAT is just to emphasise the point that how you actually analyse the type of place within the community (Tutor 3).

Before OLETT we have one article on the empathy. I think I've missed out a few emails from my students. I didn't reply to it and as I go along from there I read the article, oh, I need to reply sms. It made me aware of this (Tutor 2).

There was evidence that all of the participants were exploring new approaches to their work with their students as a direct result of the e-Educator module.

And I learn a lot through this. It's just not about e-learning, the stuff that you put up on the first unit - things about self-analysis and all those things. First time I'm enjoying it. I've never done it before. So it's very, to me, valuable. And I'll share this with ...my students when they come for intensive (teaching). At least they themselves can analyse and bring some awareness into how they learn. Once you know about yourself, then you know what to do next (Tutor 4).

...they ask us to simplify the title that we want to give to the student, because the student themselves don't know how to... err... incorporated the title, so that is quite difficult for them to search in the library. And I think I learn something new so that I can use for my students (Tutor 6).

Yeah, and I am thinking about it, because... you know... we teach students how to search for information in the library, that one they go through and... but this is online. For our students, we never really give them a guideline on how to go about doing it, so there must be a way of... you know... we can learn something and the student can learn something (Tutor 1).

But feedback assessment on a whole, I thought it was a very good unit, because it taught us a lot as to how to do online assessment and you know... it talks about characteristics of learners, and you know... comparison with face-to-face and online... and trying to see that, yes... these are our students... but where it is online you can't just simply try to give an assessment to, just the way you do it for face-to-face, you know... so, I think that part was quite good, I found it very interesting (Tutor 5).

There's a lot of examples how we can get things done, it's just that... that doing it, we're thinking... ohh... I can do this, right... no, my student cannot handle this ... you know... so... it gives us ideas about what things we can try up with our students (Tutor 1).

In Unit 4.5 there was some kind of information or something to... some ideas regarding formative online assessment and summative online assessment for us to see how it can be actually carried out, you know... because right now, I don't know about others, but what I am trying to do is... whatever we do in the face-to-face assessment, try to do it in the online environment, but whether that is effective, whether that is workable? (Tutor 5).

Unit 4.2 made me aware of someone's feelings and how we are going to respond to our students (Tutor 6).

I know about empathy, so my knowledge on empathy is there, it's just that my action and my responses is, that I have to tune it, so that it's compatible with my knowledge (Tutor 1).

I always thought about how to go about teaching students to reflect online, so I like that part of it. Unit 4.4, as you said, because again the part on critical thinking, how do I make my students to think

critically, you know... to give me a higher level piece of work, instead of just, you know... something and then you accept it, because it is so... and you to say that they are at tertiary level and this is what they can give you and you can accept it (Tutor 5).

In particular they were asked to develop an action plan for their future professional development and they responded to this very positively, for example:

After doing Units 4.1 to 4.5 which covered, you know... every single curricular area, so it's like it (Unit 4.6) wraps up the whole thing and now to think of you and your teaching and your professional development... what would you like to improve on, you know... and so, what kind of action research would you like to look at... so, I thought that was quite good (Tutor 5).

And I also find this is very interesting because it actually describes a strategy (to solve) our problems in a systematic way. So, it's quite interesting (Tutor 6).

To me, it's just saying: "Ok, so now I've gone over all the modules, and where do I go from here, what should I do next", you know... so, you have some kind of plan (Tutor 1).

The ESL tutor had over 1000 students for the course she was coordinating and this was problematic.

It's true you know to give feedback to a small group is ok. But if you mention 1000... (Tutor 3).

Now, you see, yesterday, I opened my email, there were 303 emails. And how do I go and think of empathy. I just can't. I just have to go straight to the point and answer and tell them this, that (Tutor 5).

There's one big issue for us is the group size, I mean the number of students in the class, because we were talking to M2 the other day, and he said that in UK and maybe China itself it's a non-issue, because if it is a big class, they are divided into several groups and tutor will, you know... handle it. But for us, it's 1000 and over (per tutor). So it's a great burden for feedback and assessment. To us, it has to be different for a small group and a big group, whether we like it or not, you know... some other ways to minimise marking time, you know... (Tutor 1).

However there was evidence that tutors did realise that they could respond to their students more empathetically without taking more time than they would in their normal responses (Hall & Hall, 2009).

The main curriculum part of the module, Unit 4, was constructed to have core and then more advanced studies. The intention was that personalised routes could be chosen as a result of completing the PDP in Unit 3 (Joyes, 2008). However, for the pilot, the tutors were required to study all of the curriculum core areas and they all achieved this. This meant that the tutors in the pilot had a much heavier workload within the module than a trainee tutor would have when taking a personalised route and in effect this lack of flexibility and heavy workload was the cause of some of the difficulties experienced by the tutors... .

I find it difficult. The core is the main part that we must go through in understanding the guide, the process and so on... due to time constraints.... (I am not able to study) additional resources... unless my assignment requires me and told me to go there to get more of it... (Tutor 3).

If we have more time, I'm sure we can learn a lot more, and most of you will go searching for more articles relating to it and maybe reading it, but for now we just read whatever you get (the core) (Tutor 1).

All of the tutors in the pilot expressed the desire to have local experienced tutors involved to support them. The pilot was consciously set up to provide an online mentor contact for each section of Unit 4 of the module, but only two of these mentors were known to the pilot tutors - these were the ones who had visited USM to run the workshops. However the mentor's role was not integrated into any of the learning activities. This was done consciously to develop an understanding of the actual need for online mentors within the module and the tutors were asked to identify when they felt they needed this online mentor support within the module. They in fact did ask for more support from the online mentors in Unit 4.

I think Unit 4 because it's very challenging and quite demanding actually. But whether we need to actually contact them, it's a different matter. But to have a mentor there... (Tutor 5).

We've never met them and we're not sure what are their roles (Tutor 1).

There is no right or wrong answer, but it is our feeling about it, our input... but it would be nice to get some kind of feedback to see, you know... whether we are interpreting it right or there's another way of looking at it... (Tutor 5).

There was no response from the tutors for any of the units. So, if there was some kind of feedback, then we would have been more comfortable in... other than G (chief mentor), I think the rest are not very... and you, of course. But other than that, we don't know them, so we... it's not like they are shy or anything of that nature, but it's just that you don't get... there's no two way thing, you know... so there's no rapport there, so you don't feel right about asking. So, if there was feedback, I think then it would be easier for us to approach and get something back (Tutor 5).

However, the tutors revealed that they were able to cope without the online mentor support because they met face-to-face on a regular basis throughout the module to support each other.

It helps if we have the meetings that we often have. During that time it helps. But otherwise if you were to work on your own, you will get lost sometimes (Tutor 2).

Due to the pilot nature of the module it was hardly surprising that the tutors raised a number of technical problems in the focus group interviews. However technical support was on hand to handle the minor problems and these could be rectified easily online by the University of Nottingham IT project support staff. With some of the materials there were significant problems due to low bandwidth and these were less easily resolved - in fact low bandwidth versions for some of the online materials were created and made available alongside the higher bandwidth versions. The following examples, provide an insight into some of the tutor's online experiences which highlighted problems that were eventually resolved with the module. However these experiences were a useful lesson for these tutors who had not experienced online learning prior to the module - they developed an empathetic understanding of their online students.

And then somebody post something. When I look at it, it's not there. And then the cursor doesn't work. It was just an arrow. We cannot type anywhere (Tutor 1).

There are two sets of instructions. You don't know which to follow. That's what you are saying? (Tutor 5).

...it's actually demotivating, I don't feel like doing this, every time it takes too much time just to get the information and then we are doing something and it is gone and you have to do all over again. So the amount of time spent (is great) (Tutor 6).

... And in terms of task that you have to do, sometimes one unit you have to do many different tasks and sometimes you skip one task because it's a bit hard so I want to do the next one. But sometimes you want to go back, you can't find it. Because I think there is no checklist or something like that. So I think in terms of navigation you can actually improve. I know for me, I find it is very important because if otherwise it kinda like demotivates you. I spend so much time on it. So I think those kinda things have to be improved (Tutor 4).

First thing is navigation, please make it easier for us to go forward, backward, you know... so we don't have to go through everything, just click back to the e-Educator and then choose the unit again. Sometimes we click the back arrow, it just come up with... the page not found, something like that. So it's irritating in a way (Tutor 1).

Sometimes as you go through, you have to do certain things and sometimes you skip, you go ahead because you're not sure what you're suppose to discuss or you need to get more information, and when you want to go back, you can't find where it is, you know... you can't remember. So, it's good if you have some sort like a checklist, you're suppose to do this, this, this... so that you can... and where it is (Tutor 4).

Although the tutors found the training valuable, they felt that implementing their new understandings in the USM context would be problematic. The main problem was that distance education in USM is conducted mainly offline via distance education materials supplied to students and at a face-to-face course at the end of each year. As one tutors pointed out the course is only ten percent online.

Because the problem is that we have never experienced online teaching (Tutor 6).

I think the problem here is... for distance education... I mean for us, PJJ (Distance Education), here... e-learning is just supplementary. We did not say that we are going to go fully online, teaching online, so what we are doing is teaching distance to them and then supplement it with some online... tools... it's not activities, it's not even teaching or learning online because our students... we upload something and then they download it, you know... like some assignment question, maybe some feedbacks (Tutor 1).

For us, I think it's maybe ten percent online. We communicate with students online, maybe we throw in some questions online, some discussion, but it was not compulsory. So, only a few students go in and, you know... discuss the topic and so on (Tutor 1).

And I think the main reason is the geographical factor, because every time we fall back on it and say, you know... those people in Sabah and Sarawak, especially in isolated areas... very remote areas, they are not getting access to computers. Then obviously you cannot put everything online, because there would be students who do not have access (Tutor 5).

Reflections of an online tutor (Tutor 5)

This online tutor was the one that had to handle 1000 students. She was the only English Language Instructor among the group and the only one without a PhD. The reflections below were taken from the presentation she gave at a symposium at the University of Nottingham, Semenyih campus in December 2007 on her experiences as an online tutor. The reflections were analysed for themes similar to the focus groups interviews and these themes are presented and discussed below.

The Continuing Professional Development Pedagogic Approach

Tutor 5 found this approach new and exciting and was struck by its novelty. According to her:

The CPD programmes I have attended so far did not incorporate the pedagogic approach; and the other, they were not online. Initially, I was a little confused and could not relate to it as I could

not see the whole picture. But as it progressed, I realised that this approach encapsulates the key aspects that form the core of a teacher's practice. Thus, it was most appropriate to have a CPD programme embodying this approach.

Analytic Tools

She found the analytic tools used not only new but appropriate for her to reflect upon the elements they were designed to analyse. She said:

Like the OLETT to measure empathy, PDP for professional development etc. I gained a lot of knowledge from the experiences of using these tools. The LAAT, for example, made me aware of not only all the factors one should consider but also their relationship to each other, in planning an activity.

Personal and professional impact

Content

On the whole, she found the content (the five units representing the five domains) was relevant to the aim of CPD. She explained:

The units were arranged in such a manner that it led to the reflection on one's own practice; i.e. one's professional development. The content in each unit was informative and appropriate. For example, Unit 4.4 on criticality made me think of ways to incorporate critical thinking in my teaching. Similarly, the task on information literacy made me realise that students' ability to search for materials online is taken for granted in most cases. Furthermore, most activities or concepts can be practiced with my students; like online reflection.

However, she did find some activities inappropriate. She clarified:

One such task was the one in Unit 4.5 with the Great Wall of China backdrop. The aim of the activity was not made clear, so I could not see its relevance. Then some activities (Unit 1 – posting photographs, long ice-breaking sessions etc.) were aimed for online participants distributed over a large geographical area. But since we were located in the same school, they were not appropriate.

Community

In her opinion, the e-Educator brought them (the tutors) closer. She elaborated:

Although we were a small group and knew each other, it was amazing to note how this training, through online and face-to-face interactions fostered stronger bonding between us. We were all on common ground and shared similar goals in relation to this project, even though we taught different subjects. This helped in fostering closer relationships between us. The online discussions provided a platform to know my peers better – with regards to their beliefs, attitudes, concerns etc.

Localization

She felt the e-Educator training was necessary for tutors, especially those in her school (the School of Distance Education). She gave the following reasons to support her opinion:

This is because we deal with students online. Moreover, most tutors are not equipped with pedagogic knowledge. Thus, armed with the knowledge gained from the training, tutors can deal with students better and become aware of what constitutes online teaching. This is crucial as most of us equate conventional teaching to online teaching without realising there are some serious differences between them.

However, she was aware that several issues needed to be addressed before this project could be localised. The issues she brought up were the following.

- Online activity is supplementary in the School of Distance Education. The focus is still on video conferencing, modules and face-to-face sessions. Therefore, online teaching must be introduced to implement this training more effectively.
- Students too need to undergo computer literacy training prior to the implementation. They need to change their paradigm. As distant learners they cannot just depend on the modules and face-to-face sessions. They have to accept online teaching.

- Class size is big. As I have more than 1000 students, it is impossible for me to carry out many of the activities. Most activities I carry out are group-based rather than individual tasks.
- Infrastructural problems need to be ironed out too. As students are dispersed geographically, internet access and connectivity issues must be looked into. Otherwise, online teaching cannot be carried out successfully.

The Role of the Mentor

She found the mentoring system used generally effective. She said the on-site mentors (though new to the e-Educator training modules themselves) were able to support them by arranging for meetings to coordinate the progress of members and this gave them the opportunity to share and discuss their problems. As for the off-site mentors she felt they were instrumental in helping them complete their training. She clarified:

Mentor 1 gently reminded us of deadlines and provoked further discussion from us (blog postings, discussion forum) while Mentor 2 responded to our cries of help almost immediately most of the times, especially problems related to the content or use of tools. Apart from these, they were flexible. They changed the deadlines for activities to suit our work schedule.

The only aspect that she was not satisfied with was the lack of feedback from other mentors regarding their postings. She lamented:

In fact, there was no feedback from mentors who designed some of the units. It would have been good if feedback or comments were provided to motivate us further. Some feedback came very late; when I was doing other units. It was not very effective as I did not remember the task, and so could not relate to it.

Implications

The reflections of the tutor confirmed the findings obtained from the focus groups interviews. The tutor above was one of the more confident ones but her views were not that different from the others. The findings

revealed that the tutors were slightly anxious and unsure of what their actual roles were in the initial stage but after the first workshop they were more confident and approached the module favourably. They were also positive and enthusiastic despite having to confront various types of problems. This mood was maintained throughout the whole period they were involved in the project. The key points arising from the research are as follows:

The Continuing Professional Development Pedagogic Approach

The continuing professional approach was valued by the tutors even though this was unfamiliar to them. The reflective analytic tools, the Workspace (Caley & Luong, 2009), PDP, OLETT and the LAAT were all highly valued by the tutors as they were seen as providing them with a means of reflecting upon and also discussing what they felt were key pedagogic issues.

Personal and Professional Impact

The lack of prior pedagogic training meant that the module had a strong personal impact on the tutors. The fact that the tutors implemented many of the ideas in the module from the beginning of their involvement indicated their interest in the materials.

Localisation

The materials were felt to be suited to the Malaysian context. However there was a need to address the local context in relation to the need to support up to 1000 students on some courses. This would need to be addressed if the module were to be localised in Malaysia and in other contexts with large student populations. The findings further revealed that the module was not ideally suited to USM because the distance education model currently used by the university focused too much on face-to-face interaction and it is only ten percent online. However, they believe that if the USM is willing to consider moving to a more online mode, this model can be modified and adapted for local use.

The Role of the Mentor

Little online mentor support was provided in the module to discover the tutor's views about the points in the course where this was really needed. The tutors requested for more local tutors support and for more online support for Unit 4. That seemed to be their main complaint regarding mentoring. However, the fact that they could support each other through their self support group revealed that support is not essential for the success of the module and this aspect of the design makes the module scalable in use.

Technical Issues

IT infrastructure in Malaysia does not currently adequately support rich media material but this is improving rapidly. Currently rich media materials such as video cannot be reliably played and an alternative audio and picture approach needs to be provided alongside the video materials for users with low bandwidth. If the module were to be offered in Malaysia in the near future then it would need hosting locally as low bandwidth results in some interactive elements running very slowly.

Conclusion

It is clear that the module has great potential for localisation in a variety of contexts. However, some adaptations need to be made to meet local needs. There was clear evidence of impact on the tutors' personal and professional development, with tutors trying out ideas within their teaching with little prompting from the module itself. This indicates that the curriculum was perceived as directly relevant to the tutor's contexts. The continuing professional development pedagogic approach adopted supported the natural tendency of the tutors to want to explore and reflect upon their own practice - the involvement in the module seemed to legitimise this activity. It is interesting to note that the outcome of the involvement of the USM tutors in the e-Educator module resulted in the creation of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) that engaged in discussion around pedagogy - a new experience for these and many online tutors. Another good thing that came out of this was that Tutor 5 was

awarded a scholarship to undertake her PhD studies despite exceeding the age limit set by her university.

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