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LOCALISATION OF THE E-EDUCATOR MODULE The Malaysian experience

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ABSTRACT

The University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Foreign Studies University, China have 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 eEducator module and complete all the eEducator 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 first three focus group interviews and the Blogs. The findings revealed that the eEducator 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.

Keywords: e-educator; online learning; teacher professional development; distance tutor training; community of practice.

BACKGROUND

The context for this article is the eEducator 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 (USM), Penang. Before embarking on a description of the pilot study undertaken in USM, it is necessary to provide some background to the e-educator module.

THE CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

The pedagogic design underpinning the educator training module can be characterised as using an experiential and enquiry based approach that supports tutors in managing transitions in learning and supports them in setting goals for future enquiry into practice. The module is designed to last for between 10 and 12 weeks and is a mixture of self study and online group work. A fully functional demonstrator is provided as part of the eEducator project case study on the eChina-UK programme website www.echinauk.org. The structure of the module is described below and is presented in the open source learning environment Moodle.

Unit 1 Introduction (1 week)

In this unit, tutors have the opportunity to get to know each other and to reflect on their current practice by considering eLearning pedagogy. They are also introduced to the module structure.

Unit 2 Experiential learning (3 weeks)

This unit contains eLearning content from the modules on which the tutors will be acting as tutors. In this instance, materials and examples from the MA ELT module were used. Tutors act as learners in this unit and reflect on the kind of support they need from their tutors and establish a better understanding of the tutor's role.

Unit 3 Personal development planning (PDP) (1 week)

This is a reflective unit and serves as a transition from what they already understand to further more advanced training. Tutors need to decide upon a personal development plan (PDP) which sets out the areas they will focus on in unit 4.

Unit 4 Advanced training (4-6 weeks)

Five sub-areas are identified within this unit: Empathy, Cognitive aspects, Methodology, Assessment, and Community building. Some of the content and activities are compulsory and others are optional. Tutors focus on the areas they have identified in the PDP in unit 3. The unit is completed with a study of enquiry based practice in preparation of unit 5.

Unit 5 Further reflection/Assessment (1 week)

Trainee tutors complete a portfolio outlining their achievements as well as their future training needs. This serves as a transition to their working as an online tutor.

REFLECTIVE ANALYTICAL TOOLS

The module includes a range of bespoke tools designed to support online learning. These tools are server based where they store the necessary digital data and are incorporated into the Moodle learning environment - this allows for flexibility in learning. The following describes three examples of the range of tools within the module.

The Workspace

The premise behind the Workspace is simple. If a student is working online then they should be provided with their own personalisable workspace with useful tools for learning, together with an archive of their work in one online space that can be accessed from any computer. The Workspace provides this online facility.

This removes some of the organizational and technical barriers that face the online learner and ensures their energies are focused on engaging with the learning materials not the technology.

It provides the learner and their tutor with a comprehensive set of tools (Figure 1) for effective online academic working, reviewing completed activities/work which is archived, note taking, reflective writing, bibliographic referencing, sharing with peers, submitting assignments and getting feedback from their tutor. (More information, in Joyes, et al., 2008)

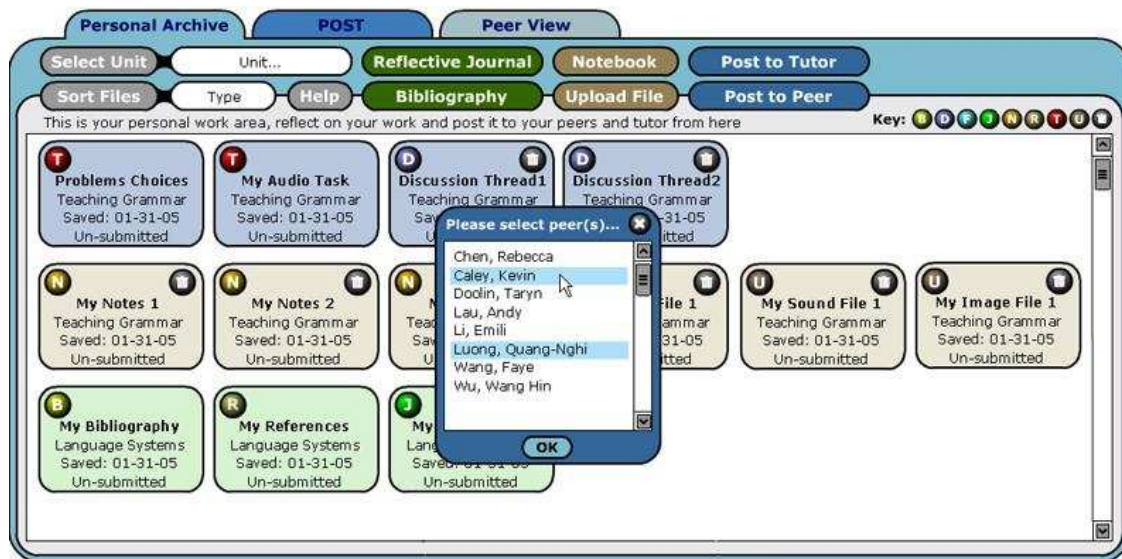


Figure: 1 The Workspace

The Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT)

The LAAT (Figure: 2) is an online interactive tool that represents an activity system which is a way of visualizing the total configuration of an activity (Engeström 1987).

This approach is based on activity theory (Leont'ev 1981; Vygotsky 1978) and it has been argued that e-learning activities that involve collaborative learning can be seen as types of learning support and can be represented as an activity system (Merrill 2002 ; Oliver & Herrington 2001).

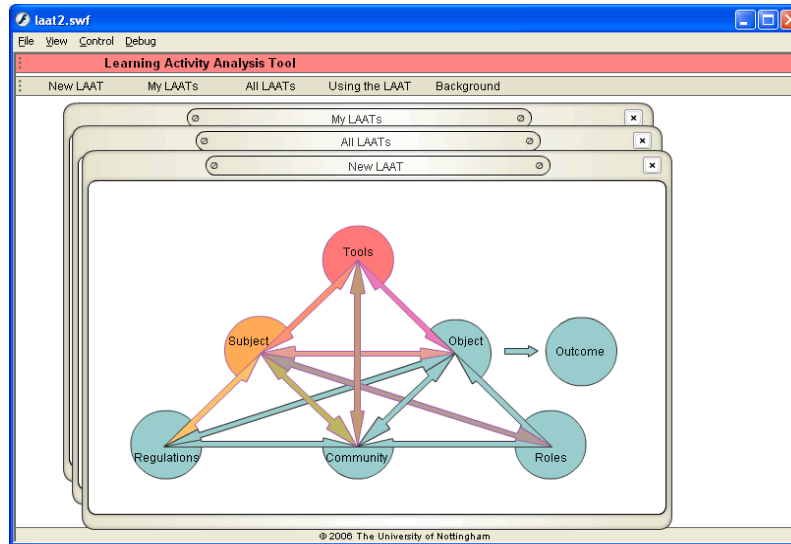


Figure: 2
The Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT)

The LAAT, a key feature of the eEducator training module, is used to provide a framework for the tutor to review online learning activities and so mediate the designed learning experience for the online learners. The LAAT provides the means of matching the designed learning activity to the current context for learning as well as the means by which the trainee tutors are supported in reflecting upon and researching their own practice. In the module, trainee tutors use the LAAT to analyse learning activities and, consider the range of strategies that might be used to support their online learners. Their analyses are saved online and can be shared and discussed with their peers in order to develop ongoing understanding of effective practice. (More information in Joyes, et al., 2008)

The On-Line Empathy Training Tool (OLETT)

The Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) appears in Unit 4 of the eEducator module and is a learning tool which features in the 'Empathy' sub unit. The intended users are tutors at tertiary level who have identified a personal and professional development need for themselves in the area of creating, building, and maintaining rapport in interpersonal and intergroup virtual communication as well as being able to support the development of policies and protocols for the institutional management of online communities. OLETT is still at the development stage and was trialled by tutors at the University of Science Malaysia. (More information in Joyes, et al., 2008)

THE MALAYSIAN PILOT

The eEducator 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? This paper explores the research approach and findings of the pilot of the eEducator module at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

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 eEducator module and complete all the eEducator 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, and 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 years of distance teaching experience ranged from one-and-a-half years to twenty-three years. All of them described their confidence in using Information Communication Technologies as 3 except for one that rated herself as 3.5 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 to 300 students.

A series of four face to face workshops 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 eEducator module, its structure and ways of working. The learning tools were also introduced. A focus group interview was conducted at the end of the workshop to find out the tutors' preliminary reactions towards the module. From this point onwards the tutors worked through the module online 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 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. 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 the necessary background information of 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 four 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 interview on the second week of November 2007. Finally, questionnaires were given to the students to elicit their responses on issues regarding empathy, one of the themes within the module.

This paper will share the results of the first three focus group interviews and the Blogs. As for the Blogs, the tutors were required to complete them after the first workshop and on completion of each unit, to reflect upon their experience and the relevance of the materials to their practice. The interviews lasted around one and a half hours using a semi structured approach. Focus groups 2 to 4 questions were informed by an initial analysis of the Blog entries. The interviewer who was the Malaysian Associate Researcher for the project would ask the questions and allow the tutors give their views freely with minimum intervention. Each focus group interview was audio recorded and transcribed and the following is a discussion of the findings.

FINDINGS OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Findings of Focus Group Interview I (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 were explained quite clearly (at the workshop). (Tutor 2)

Just now I called Gordon (UoN mentor & 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 Gordon, Carol (UoN workshop leader) and you (the interviewer) 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 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 and 3 (FGI 2 & FGI 3)

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)

... 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)

The tutors had very favourable opinions of the online tools for example, the Professional Development Planning tool - PDP , Learning Activity Analysis Tool - LAAT and Online Empathy Training Tool – OLETT. 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 you 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 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 eEducator 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)

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)

No, you see, yesterday, I opened my email, there were 303 emails. And how do I go and think of empathy and who knows what when I'm doing it. I just can't. I just have to go straight to the point and answer and tell them this, that. You know the tactic. Yes. OK. No. (Tutor 5)

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.

They generally found the eEducator approach systematic but complained they did not have time to go beyond the core components.

I find it difficult. The core is the main part that we must go through in understanding the guide, the process and so on. And on the left hand side, is the sub sub sub of it, so where we are and so on. The part, if I'm not told to go in, I will not go in. Probably due to time constraints. Additional resources or whatever you know. Unless my assignment requires me and told me to go there to get more of it then I will go. (Tutor 3)

The tutors were required to study all of the curriculum core areas during the pilot and they all achieved this. In practice the module was designed so that personalised routes could be chosen as a result of completing the PDP in Unit 3. This meant that the tutors have a much heavier workload within the module than a trainee tutor would have when taking a personalized route.

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, 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 mentors role was not integrated into any of the learning activities.

This was done 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 also. When are in doubt or uncertainty or we don't understand certain instruction, can we contact them? (Tutor 1)

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

... 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 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 demotivate you. I spend so much time on it. So I think those kinda things have to be improved. (Tutor 4)

Findings from the Blogs on impact on the tutors notions of effective practice. There is further clear evidence from the six tutors' Blogs of an examination of assumptions about their online students and a consideration of the implications for their own practice. This example is taken from reflection on the work they undertook on information literacy and criticality in Unit four of the module.

I find this unit challenging and very useful. It made me wonder how well prepared are the students on information literacy. Have they been taught on how to do online search, how to select information, evaluate, organize it into related ideas and concepts?

I think because our students are adults, we just assume they have the skills to conduct online search on their own.At this point I am trying to figure out where we shall put the 'training' on information literacy. (Tutor 1)

Implications

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, 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 localized in Malaysia and in other contexts with large student populations.

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. 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 with some adaptations 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 eEducator module resulted in the creation of a community of practice (Wenger, 2006) that engaged in discussion around pedagogy -a new experience for these and may online tutors.

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He is currently Director of the HEFCE funded V-ResORT project developing interactive online materials to train research students. He researches and publishes in the field of online learning. He has recently been the project manager for the three University of Nottingham eChina- UK projects which has involved collaboration with both Chinese and Malaysian universities. He is currently Director of the HEFCE funded V-ResORT project developing interactive online materials to train research students.

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