

Effective Technology–Mediated Education for Adult Chinese Learners

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INTRODUCTION

This article will address several areas relating to online learning and technology. We will report on work done in the development of four models that have been used to deliver effective professional development for adult learners. The courses are run in Taiwan from a base at Feng Chia University in Taichung, and all the attendees are Chinese. The key content is developed by instructors who are all native speakers of English from a range of countries. Some of this key content is delivered face-to-face and some is delivered virtually. Course facilitators are experienced in online learning and are Chinese. Our models thus utilize both internationally known teachers and local expertise. In addressing the training and education development needs of adult learners in a Chinese context, we needed to consider and accommodate three types of challenges:

- the constraints and demands on busy adult learners;
- the challenges of second language learning; and
- the use of technology-mediated distance education.

Each of these areas is challenging and complex in its own right. Many of the contributions in this encyclopedia will address one or more of these areas in some depth. This article should be considered as complementary to those focused contributions. Our globalized world is complex and multi-faceted, and this article attempts to show how the application of knowledge and experience in several areas can be combined.

BACKGROUND

Adult Second Language Learners

There is a vast literature on adult education. Recurring themes in this literature are that adult learners are often more motivated than younger learners and come to a specific educational program with relatively clear goals in mind. They can also often relate course material to their own work settings and thus internalize and adapt knowledge in a way that can be immediately useful in the workplace. However, there are several problems that adult learners face. These include the need to juggle time constraints so that the demands of the educational program can be fitted into busy professional lives and family commitments. Adult learners, even those in senior positions, may no longer be accustomed to the discipline of structured educational offerings; many comment that it has been a long time since they were on the “education conveyor belt.” Finally, when technology is involved, many adult learners have lower levels of confidence in becoming accustomed to and using online forums and Internet searching. All these factors are well documented, for example, in Jarvis (1995) and Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997).

The adult learner who is working in a second language faces additional challenges. Spack and Zamel (1998) argue that the conventions, concepts, and terms that a teacher uses in any classroom creates a unique subculture, and successful learners are those who learn to read and interpret this culture. If the language nuances are not understood, it is very difficult for learners to work effectively. The level of English in Taiwan is not high (Yiu, 2003), and so this challenge needed special attention in the design of courses. Contributors to Duke

(1987) echo this need and provide some local examples of successful practice in China. These examples all highlight the need for building flexibility into the design of educational programs so that the needs of individual learners can be met; in the language of constructivism, so that there is adequate scaffolding for all learners. These learning needs include both linguistic and cultural factors that are often difficult to define a priori; hence, the need for ongoing facilitation and negotiation. Chang's (2004) study of different strategies adopted by adult education trainers in the United States and in Taiwan clearly demonstrates the primacy of the factor of cultural negotiation.

Ensuring that Technology Facilitates Learning

It is quite curious that early Web-based teaching appeared to be regressive in that the drive to put materials "on the Web" led to a didactic environment. However, we seem to be moving out of this phase now and the communicative power of the Web has come to the fore. There are excellent guides available now about how to support eLearners in communicating online and developing meaningful online communities. The five-stage model of Salmon (2004) is useful in this regard. She discusses the importance of first ensuring good connectivity and motivation, then setting up online socialization, before there is any real academic information exchange or knowledge construction that might lead to more permanent ongoing development.

Mature designs for online learning make use of the multiple functions of the Web and the art lies in using an appropriate mix. McNaught (2002) matches common online facilities such as forums, quizzes, upload areas, and the like to the four major functions of communicative interaction, conducting assessment and providing feedback to learners, supporting progress through a formal program of study, and providing resources for students to use. Alexander (2001) comments that such attention to detailed design must also take into account teachers' pedagogical beliefs and the nature of the student population. So, again, we highlight the need to have flexible, adaptable models and designs (Blass & Davis, 2003). As noted earlier, adult learners may find online learning more daunting than younger learners (Cahoon, 1998) and so the need for careful, supportive, flexible designs is even more important.

THE FOUR MODELS

These four models have all been used in Taiwan in various professional development courses for adult learners. They are summarized in Table 1.

Model 1

Model 1 was developed during the time of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in the first half of 2003 and was used by 180 participants learning about e-learning management and design (Ching, Poon, & McNaught, 2003). These virtual eWorkshops were developed rapidly, to replace a face-to-face international conference that had to be postponed because of the SARS epidemic. It was gratifying that the whole process ran so smoothly. The seven international instructors from Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and the United States produced course packs that included narrated presentations and a course reader in English. The tiered support system used for the online discussions involved a Chinese-intensive discussion at the first level, with questions being referred to more experienced online facilitators with good bilingual skills. If necessary, the questions could be translated into English and sent to the international instructors. The data from the evaluation of these eWorkshops is reported in Ching, Poon, and McNaught (2003) and is summarized briefly in Table 2.

Model 2

Model 2 was used in the period February to May 2004 for a three-credit postgraduate-level certificate course with 50 participants also learning about e-learning management and design. A sandwich arrangement was used, with two modules being run as full-weekend intensive sessions followed by a month of online activity, then two more weekends of more advanced modules and another month of online activity which, at the time of writing, is just concluding. Midway through the course an evaluation was carried out. The richness of the face-to-face weekends has been appreciated. But it has been hard to sustain the "high" of these weekends into the forums. Many of the participants have very senior posts in Taiwan and a sustained commitment to online discussion has been very hard to maintain. It is interesting that the online activity level during the

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