Chapter XIV

Introducing E-Learning in a Traditional Chinese Context

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Abstract

This chapter describes an attempt to introduce e-learning to a group of language teacher educators in a traditional Chinese context. It reports on the strategies adopted in a one-year teaching development project, responses of participants, typical instructional designs generated and the causes for innovation-decision. It argues that even in a context with a strong transmission tradition, an ordinary member can still function as a "change agent" in diffusing teaching innovation and developing a focused learning community. By revealing the process and results of the attempt, the author hopes that other practitioners can continue to explore feasible ways of stimulating active learning in both teachers and students. Lessons learned from this study may also enable instructional designers to gain a better understanding of how to promote their work in similar cultural contexts.

Introduction

Despite a long history of being an international city, Hong Kong has a dominant Chinese population. Chinese is the official language and Chinese Language is a core subject in the school curriculum. Because of the ethnic background of the society, learning or teaching Chinese has never been confined to the study of the language system. Instead, it covers a broad scope of literature and culture, which includes the transmission of traditional values and the cultivation and appreciation of Chinese culture in its entirety. As a result, teachers of the subject have generally been perceived as relatively conservative or resistant to innovation.

With the rapid development of information technology, various disciplines are under pressure to adopt online facilities to promote learning. Although the use of technology does not imply an automatic enhancement in learning quality, the emergent shift to a new mode of communication is gradually transforming learning and challenges the traditional ways of teaching and learning Chinese in Hong Kong. Among the eight local tertiary education institutions, which have all embraced e-learning of some kind, none of their Chinese language related units seem to be making an effective use of online facilities. Lecturing, group discussion and tutorials are the key learning activities in the course descriptions. Teaching and learning of Chinese appear to be conceptualized mainly in terms of traditional face-to-face teaching approaches.

In order to generate a meaningful environment for learning Chinese with information and communication technologies (ICT), this chapter makes a novel attempt to introduce e-learning to a "community of practice" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in Chinese language teacher- education. It reports on the strategies used by the author for introducing e-learning ideas to a group of teacher educators of Chinese, responses of participants, typical ways of "blended learning" (Bates & Poole, 2003) and the causes for the innovation-decision.

The case study examines the ways in which e-learning can be possibly introduced in a context with a strong transmission tradition. The approach is particularly meaningful because the course participants were either in-service teachers or prospective teachers. Their e-learning experiences can have a profound impact on their future instructional designs, implying ultimate changes in the teaching and learning of the traditional school subject. Once the seeds of e-learning are sown in the field of Chinese, fellow practitioners can continue to explore feasible ways of stimulating students to learn more actively. The lessons learned from this implementation may also serve as a reference for instructional designers promoting their work in similar cultural contexts.

Background

The role of ICT has become prominent in most education sectors because it increases access and flexibility for both learners and teachers. A review of the literature shows that ICT can facilitate active learning, provide meaningful experiences and promote lifelong learning (Damoense, 2003; Grabe & Grabe, 2004). By combining online learning with face-to-face

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