

Collaboration for inter-cultural e-learning: A Sino-UK case study

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This paper presents work in progress in a Sino-UK project to develop inter-cultural e-learning through a collaborative team process that is itself inter-cultural. The Universities of Lancaster and Sheffield are working with Beijing Normal University, Beijing Jiaotong University, South China Normal University and Zhejiang Normal University to develop joint understandings of e-learning through the design, production and implementation of an online course. This will be a short, fully virtual course run on Moodle starting in October 2006 that will offer Higher Education teachers in the UK and China a professional development opportunity to understand more about inter-cultural e-learning. In the project the Sino-UK team are working collaboratively in ways that enable pedagogies and practices about e-learning from both China and the UK to be incorporated into the learning design of the online course. This has required us to share pedagogic beliefs, experiences of e-learning and e-tutoring in order to achieve effective decision-making around design and joint course production that draws on the collective expertise and experience of both the UK and Chinese teams. We have found that inter-cultural collaboration requires an understanding of policy, institutional, subject and role cultures as well as pedagogic beliefs. Inter-cultural collaboration has the potential to lead to new e-learning practice, but we are also experiencing considerable impact on our existing practice and challenges to our 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about e-learning, professional development enhancement and institutional and national impact.

Keywords: e-learning, learning design, pedagogic beliefs, e-tutor training, inter-cultural collaboration, professional development

Introduction

The paper addresses the themes of cultural differences in e-learning, intercultural collaboration for joint development and understanding of e-learning, inter-cultural decision-making in e-learning and the impact of these factors on the professional development of members of the team. These themes represent the major challenges faced and experienced by the project team in relation to the inter-cultural collaboration processes in the project. A rationale is given for the strategic significance of each of these themes, supported by references to the literature and examples from both the Chinese and the UK context. There is a brief outline of the methodological approach being implemented for researching the project as a case study. The collaborative processes led to practical outcomes in terms of decisions that were made about the design and implementation of the inter-cultural e-learning course and these are briefly presented. Finally some tentative conclusions are presented to assess the significance of the case study as a contribution to an understanding of international collaboration and intercultural practice in e-learning.

Background

This paper presents research that is taking place in a project which is part of the Sino-UK elearning programme (eChina UK - further information at <http://www.echina.uk.org>) jointly funded by HEFCE in the UK and by institutional funding in China. The project partners are the Universities of Lancaster and Sheffield in the UK and Beijing Normal University, Beijing Jiaotong University, South China Normal University and Zhejiang Normal University in China. One of the goals of the eChina-UK Programme as a whole is to develop understandings in both countries of cultural change and exchange in eLearning pedagogy (Spencer-Oatey, 2006). The aim of this particular work package is the collaborative production of an intercultural, professional development e-learning and teaching course, to be run online and offered to higher education staff in the UK and China which would involve the examination of intercultural (Sino-UK) conceptions of e-learning. In order to achieve this goal, the members of the UK-China team are working collaboratively to design and produce the online course. This has required the

implementation of an intercultural collaborative approach to e-learning design – that is, a process that builds on different conceptions and approaches to e-learning and leads to decision-making around design, using features and practices from both the UK and Chinese contexts.

The project builds on the e-learning policy priorities of both countries. In China the large numbers of distributed learners in relation to the numbers of teachers has led to a rapid growth in distance learning and the numbers of universities (68) accredited to provide online degrees. In the UK, e-learning is a strategic priority for HEFCE and is also linked to the internationalization of higher education (HEFCE, 2005). Priorities for e-learning include using technology to enhance the learner experience, a focus on quality and standards through benchmarking and a call for more research and evaluation. E-learning is seen as part of globalization to build capacity in ‘borderless’ education and distance learning, thus improving the competitiveness and marketisation of higher education and impact on international cooperation and student mobility.

At the same time, the Chinese Ministry of Education is introducing curriculum reform about new methodologies related to student-centred learning, group work and teacher-student interaction and this was a strategic driver of the project. Chinese e-learning policy also prioritises quality, standards and widening participation. The Chinese team had considerable experience developing e-learning with educational technology as the subject and instructional system design (ISD) as their pedagogic model, while the UK team the UK’s team experience was of developing e-learning as collaborative learning through online groups and communities, with weave of social theories of knowledge construction as the basis of a pedagogic model (Lally et al., 2006). The intercultural collaboration focused on sharing the two approaches to e-learning and exploring whether it was possible to use design features from both models in the design of the online course.

Issues of cultural difference in e-learning

E-Learning is now a global phenomenon that in the West is a strategic element of the marketisation and internationalization of higher education. Its strategic importance and growth is based on the assumption that e-learning is ‘borderless’ According to Middlehurst (2002) “borderless education” removes boundaries/constraints in relation to time, space, distance, student recruitment/mobility, sectoral differences, education and corporate worlds. Many national e-learning policies assume that “borderless education” is unproblematic. However, the global development of e-learning often ignores the issue of cultural difference and a number of writers in the e-learning field have identified this as an issue. Moore, Shattuck and Al-Harthi (2006) for example raise important questions about the complex relationship of e-teaching, learning and culture in global online environments, with examples from American distance learning to show how pedagogies based on Western beliefs might cause conflict with the cultural values of learners from other countries. Ziguras (2001) while acknowledging that “educational imperialism” often occurs within transnational education, observes that the use of ICT has intensified the flow of “knowledge transfer” and therefore the concerns about cultural impacts of ICT. Henderson (1996) in addressing the question of how to develop culturally contextualized e-learning, developed a Multiple Cultural Pedagogic Model of interactive multimedia design that was based on the 14 dimensions of interactive learning of Reeves (1992). The 14 dimensions of interactive learning used by Reeves encapsulated many of the issues related to pedagogic beliefs in e-learning that have emerged in the eChina-UK collaboration, for example “Pedagogical Philosophy (Instructivism vs Constructivist), Goal Orientation (Sharply focused vs Unfocused), Role of Instructor (Teacher Proof vs Equalitarian Facilitator)” (Reeves, 1992). Collis (1999) identified the need to operationalize the accommodation of cultural difference into the design of e-learning by providing some design guidelines for flexibility that respond to multiple cultures. However, these guidelines related to on-campus blended learning contexts in one university. In our eChina-UK project, we are attempting to build on e-learning pedagogic features from two different educational cultures – the UK and China – to design an online course through intercultural collaboration that will attract higher education teachers from both countries.

The action research process

One of the aims of the project is collaborative research and we have implemented a research process in the project to enable members of the project to carry out action research in relation to their own professional interests and also stimulate and achieve joint publication. For example, my own research

questions relate particularly to intercultural pedagogy in e-learning – what critical theories and pedagogies influence the design and implementation of successful intercultural e-learning; how do e-tutors facilitate intercultural e-learning; can intercultural e-learning achieve aspects of social translation that go beyond education, for example impact on policy and professionalism? The action research will enable the use of three qualitative approaches to methodology: case study, ethnography and grounded theory. The research methods being used include interviews with participants, participant-observation, analysis of project and policy documents, online discourse analysis and use of reflective journals.

The experience of intercultural collaboration

Effective intercultural collaboration is essential to the success of intercultural projects such as this, but intercultural collaboration is complex. The feature of complexity in this project is the culturally different educational practices of the partners who must come together to work as a team to make decisions in relation to course production that lead to high quality e-learning. However, good collaboration rarely happens by accident, and as Maznevski (1994) points, cultural diversity can pose barriers to effective interaction. Our aim in this intercultural collaboration has been to attempt to implement a process through which we are able to understand each other, share the pedagogic ideas and expertise in e-learning of the partners, and build on these to develop new ideas that might lead to new ideas about e-learning and/or transfer of knowledge. Integrating pedagogic ideas to implement in the design of e-learning means more than identifying underpinning theories that inform particular learning and teaching practices. According to Goodyear (2001) it involves bringing together pedagogic ideas with methods, tools and processes for facilitating learning and linked closely to the design of learning tasks and activities and the functionalities of the technologies being used. It also encompasses the existing context of learning and integration with existing learning and teaching practices that will inevitably be adapted and changed through its impact. In an intercultural project, the processes of communication and collaboration must be strong enough for this to happen and our experience suggests that these processes should be planned and facilitated.

Communication and language issues

Project meetings are conducted in both English and Chinese, with both project teams having a bilingual capacity. Many members of the Chinese team are English teachers, so there is obviously the motivation to practice speaking in English. The online course will be taught in English, as that is the language of the internet.

We have set up protocols to support communication within the project outside of project meetings. These include use of Skype telephony, discussion forums in Moodle, e-mails, video-conferencing, progress reports and exchange of resources.

However, we still find it essential to have face-to-face meetings where members of the team can get to know each other. As our respective beliefs of e-learning are the focus of project meetings, ideas and understandings of e-learning terminologies, issues and practices are constantly discussed, revisited and renegotiated through the process of developing and producing e-learning materials. We reach agreement on the meaning of terminologies but constantly have to revisit our understandings, and as a consequence have to rework ideas and materials in the light of new understandings.

Pedagogic issues

There were contrasting views on e-learning pedagogy between the UK and the Chinese teams.

The professional e-learning experience of the UK team was of fully virtual teaching through a virtual learning environment, practising networked learning as defined by Goodyear (2002):

Networked learning is learning in which communications and information technology (C&IT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources (Goodyear, 2002).

A key aspect of the UK's theoretical approach to e-learning is a social-constructivist view of learning that also considers the situativity of learning processes. A key feature for us of e-learning design is the major significance of online discussions where participants link new knowledge to their prior knowledge and actively construct new internal representations of the ideas being presented (Boekaerts & Simons, 1995). We also believe that group learning is very important, drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and Lave and Wenger (1991) and that learning is a process of participating in cultural practices, a process that structures and shapes cognitive activity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Consequently in our design approach to e-learning we put more emphasis on the learning community and dialogic processes and less on the production of learning materials and pre-defined learning outcomes. In our model the teachers are also the course developers.

The Chinese approach to e-learning has been strongly influenced by instructional systems design that supports learning as the acquisition of propositional knowledge. The Chinese team had a considered approach to e-learning based on an organizational framework for a web-based curriculum with defined activities developed by Huang and Zhou (2005). This tends to lead to a production model as defined by Cao, Wang, & Tang (2005):

A key textbook is used as the source of content for each course. This is 'reappropriated' for the online learning setting; instructional designers prepare the content of the book for presentation online. Tutors who have not been involved in the development of the course content or in the learning and teaching processes to be pursued in the course are recruited to teach the learning material. Students are expected to focus on 'learning' the content, largely on their own (Cao et al., 2005).

In the Chinese model, the production of e-learning is separated from the learning and teaching process and there is little online communication and group work. On the other hand, the online class size in China is about 10 times larger than in the UK so there is an issue of scalability and practicality and whether the UK model of an online learning community would be successful in China. The Chinese team also had an interest in problem-based learning as providing an authentic context for learning that motivates the learner, and this helped to provide a 'bridge' between two pedagogies – collaborative e-learning and problem-based learning that could both be incorporated into the learning design. Many experts, for example Weller (2002), believe that it is possible to mix pedagogic models into one design, but we will have to wait and see whether our learning design is successful.

Intercultural decision-making about e-learning design

How can an e-learning design be intercultural?

It was agreed that the theoretical model for the development of the online course would be the learning community model with some elements of problem-based learning, but with design features adapted from the Chinese context and use of resources from both a Chinese and a UK context. Some of the materials are bi-lingual and in addition the e-tutoring team comprises e-tutors from both the UK and China. English language support will be provided for Chinese learners and the Chinese e-tutors will themselves also be supported and mentored. Written resources will have summary annotations for Chinese learners, and the e-tutoring team will mediate any language/communication issues through integral learner support. Though the collaboration, the online course has now been designed and is in the process of being completed for October. It is a short course involving about 50 hours of study over 10 weeks. The design of the course is evidence of how the collaboration has enabled the two teams to move from their theoretical background to make decisions about an adapted design of an online course that could be implemented in a higher education context both in the UK and in China. It has the following features:

- Online learning community/group work/group problem-based learning;
- 3 phases, each with specific purpose and learning outcomes;
- A minimum of 3 activities for each phase;
- Online resources linked to key topics, including readings, audio files, powerpoints, video clips;
- Moodle is being customised and tools embedded as online course is developed;

- Design of course is determining roles and competences of e-tutors;
- Assessment through e-portfolio, to receive Certificate of Completion.

Table 1: Outline of online course (using Moodle – open source virtual learning environment)

Phase	Purpose	Activity	Resources/tools
Induction	Preparation for online learning	Practice online discussion in Moodle Activity feedback Roles of participants and e-tutors	Induction reader Audio file Discussion forum e-portfolio tool Skype internet telephony
Unit 1	Becoming a learning community	Introductions & goals Thinking about being a learning community	Introductions template Discussion on key reading Use e-portfolio tool Summary
Unit 2	Conceptions of e-learning Sharing conceptions Producing group conceptions	Group problem-based learning Working in pairs and sharing Produce group report	Construction of conceptions template e-portfolio tool Sample readings/case studies Summary Questions template Resources for topics Group template Summary
Unit 3	Reflections & closing	Present learning products & feedback Sharing group products Evaluate experience & complete template Submit portfolio Accreditation	Evaluation template e-portfolio tool Summary

E-tutor training

The intercultural design has implications for the role of the e-tutor, the person who is responsible for facilitating the collaborative activities of the learners as they engage in the learning activities presented above. This insight revealed a gap in the provision of effective e-tutor training, both in China and the UK, particularly in enabling teachers to manage the change from teaching face-to-face to teaching online and that develops pedagogic as well as technological expertise. The e-tutor training has therefore been developed and embedded in the project collaboration, as the e-tutors from China and the UK have been directly involved in the design task of building the online course. This started at a face-to-face project meeting and has continued online in Moodle, including the building of resources. The e-tutors have participated in research interviews reflecting on their professional development for e-tutoring. These interviews have revealed that e-tutor training as professional development opportunity is a new concept in China. In the final face-to-face session of e-tutor training over two days there will be 3 elements: (i) induction into Moodle; (ii) induction into course content and structure; and (iii) induction into e-teaching strategy comprising team approach to e-tutoring, tutor-led and tutor-facilitated online discussion, handling problems, online learner support and e-tutor support. During the online course there will be an e-tutor forum, including language support, an e-tutor code of practice and co-mentoring of e-tutors. After the course the e-tutors will participate in evaluation of the course and further post-course interviews. We believe this process is essential to achieve the professional development potential of the e-tutors. As a result of running the online course, we are expecting to gain considerable insight about intercultural issues relating to international collaboration, e-tutor training and intercultural online learning.

Conclusion

This paper is presented a case study on the experience of developing intercultural collaboration in a Sino-UK context and gives some indication of the collaborative process that has enabled the e-learning teams from the UK and China to move towards a more intercultural, shared understanding of pedagogy in which learning designs are developed and implemented that are built on the knowledge and expertise of both teams. We have learned that intercultural collaboration on e-learning is demanding and time-consuming but is ultimately worthwhile, because new knowledge, creativity, insights and practices can be developed. However, critical shared reflection on beliefs and practices of e-learning is an essential requirement to maintain the process of effective intercultural collaboration.

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Bionotes

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