DESIGNING AN INTEGRATED CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TEACHING MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the design phase of a four-phased project that aims to develop a new pedagogically valid and culturally sensitive teaching model that could be considered for use in a joint degree program between the University of Tasmania (Utas) and partner institutions in China. The model features a more integrated approach making effective use of onsite block teaching and an elaborate utilization of existing WebCT tools, especially those of use in communication and assessment, thus facilitating constructive and collaborative learning. Guidelines are suggested for online learning, block teaching and tutorials that constitute the delivery of each academic unit.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology over the past few decades has had a huge impact on education. Many Universities and corporate training institutes have rapidly adopted the new technology. The driving factors are many, including multiple campuses of universities, the requirements of distance education, numerous grants promoting innovations in teaching, and the emergence of rapidly evolving educational software such as WebCT, Blackboard and Lotus Notes that aim to service these needs. Use of this new technology has made available a more flexible teaching mode that delivers benefits to both educational providers and learners. However how well it is used is another matter. One survey by Mioduser et.al. (1999) concluded that most of the current educational websites surveyed at that time did not conform to the pedagogical standards favoured by educational researchers.

Much research and many teaching experiments have been done within an educational environment where learners have a specific type of problem, e.g. they cannot attend lectures because of some sort of disadvantage such as a physical problem, or that they are geographically isolated. This research mostly accepts (often implicitly) that language competency is an assumed skill for all participants. However, existing literature does not often examine the situation where this is not a valid assumption, e.g. in situations that may involve conflicts between a widely accepted way of teaching in the Western world and its acceptance in other cultures. It could be useful to make a reality check in an educational setting where there exists a huge difference in culture, in educational principles and practices, and in the readiness of learners. This reality check could be used to confirm or deny McLoughlin & Oliver’s (1999) statement that ‘cultures have identifiable dimensions, goals, expectations and that variations in learning styles, modes of communication and participation impact on learning’. This research project intends to address some of these issues through carefully designed learning activities that aim to help students bridge these gaps and gradually adapt to a new learning schemata.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Utas has just started a joint degree program with several tertiary educational institutions in China. English is the language used for teaching and communication in this program. The program enrols students in China who have passed university entrance examinations and have obtained 5.5 IELTS, a UK English proficiency test, as the entrance level of competence in English.

Under the current teaching arrangement, Utas provides all the teaching resources on-line through WebCT. Utas also sends coordinating staff to deliver onsite teaching, each unit having two five-day onsite visits that cover...
unit contents in a block mode. The two visits are placed at the beginning and the end of a semester. Tutors are employed locally for weekly tutorials and practical sessions. The enrolment of each unit will range from 200 to 400. This joint program is in its first year first semester and has uncovered many pedagogical issues apart from those related to administration. This paper intends to investigate and address some of these pedagogical issues.

METHODOLOGY

The project is planned to be split into four phases. Phase one involves designing a new teaching model based on known pedagogical principles and practices, ranging from collaborative theory (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb 1999), constructivist theory (McLoughlin & Oliver 1999), self-directed learning concepts (Radloff et. al., 2000) plus the use of formative feedback and on-line self assessment (Peat, 2000), in an attempt to minimise pedagogical problems that are already emerging. Phase two will implement the proposed teaching model, involving staff training to fully deploy the functions of WebCT, with special reference to the use of communication and online assessment tools that assist in online monitoring of students’ learning. Lessons learnt from this monitoring will be used to help structure and organise the onsite teaching. The role of tutors will also be more specifically defined to help with the process of creating a database of unit related key concepts and common misconceptions. Phase three will evaluate the teaching model through a combination of interviews of teaching staff in both Utas and China, plus undertaking a survey of students enrolled in the program. The survey will aim to assist in suggesting and validating good culturally sensitive pedagogical practices, including looking for options to extend and improve the proposed teaching model. Phase four will involve the design and implementation of a second version of the teaching model that will aim to include all the lessons learnt in the first three stages of the project. The current paper describes Phase One of the project. It involves investigating pedagogical and practical issues relating to the current teaching model and designing an alternative teaching model that will seek to structure online and onsite teaching in a more effective and culturally sensitive manner.

CURRENT TEACHING MODEL AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

- **Language**: Competency in English has been observed to be the biggest barrier. The IELTS test does not test technical vocabulary. While some of this technical language is available in inter-language dictionaries, many academic disciplines are changing so rapidly that many of the technical terms used have not yet reached the stage of dictionary inclusion. Additionally, English in China is usually taught with either an English or American accent. Adjusting to an Australian accent can be initially difficult for many Chinese students. Problems in comprehension can result. Thus even though students must get 5.5 in IELTS to enter the program, their English skills are often not sufficient to allow them to easily handle an academic course from an Australian university. Since lowering the standards is not an option and neither is it feasible to force a higher standard when students are not ready, it is a requirement that units be carefully designed to prepare and assist students to meet the expected Australian standard.

- **Block teaching**: During each visit to China, lecturers from Utas cover half of the unit content in five days. Slavin (2002) commented that ‘research over the past 20 years has shown that the traditional lecture/assignments/lab approach is not very successful in facilitating learning’. Intensive delivery had been observed to give students hardly any time to think, reflect, inwardly digest and learn the material presented. This problem is compounded when students who have limited skills in understanding oral English encounter unfamiliar technical terms presented in a similarly unfamiliar Australian accent. A solution to this problem requires students to be well prepared before the block courses - people have been found to experience less language problems when dealing with relatively familiar concepts and content. But what is meant by preparation by the
students? How many students conscientiously do the recommended readings before they come to lectures, and how much understanding do they retain from that reading? The writers feel that a careful design of learning activities is required to ensure that the ideal of motivated, active learning is maintained before the block teaching is delivered.

- **Online learning**: Although computer-assisted and Internet-based learning is not a new concept in China with the current diffusion of Internet technology and web access, adopting online learning in a university campus is quite a new paradigm. One of the authors (YC) has been both a University student and lecturer in Shanghai, and her experience suggests that many Chinese students expect to see lecturers and hear them talk in the classroom, expecting to take notes and memorize new concepts. Many tend to think of online learning as a solution for people unable to physically attend an onsite course. Many have not experienced online learning, let alone appreciated the potential value that an online course can offer. Thus a successful design should enable students to enjoy the online learning experience while changing student attitudes so that learning becomes self-motivated.

- **WebCT**: WebCT is the software used to deliver much of the on-line material to Utas distance education students. It offers a variety of tools. Some do nothing more than assist the hosting of static files, while others facilitate various means of interaction. Learning the navigation path does not take a student much time but learning to make effective use of the communication tools certainly involves a radical change to the existing learning styles of many Chinese students. McLoughlin & Oliver (1999) notes that Stoney & Wild (1998), Wild & Henderson (1997) both note ‘that cultures have identifiable … variations in learning styles, modes of communication and participation [that have] impact on learning’. In addition, Briguglio (2000) notes that students from differing cultures have differing expectations of the role of lecturers. Traditionally students in China are trained to be good listeners. Teaching tends to involve a lecturer presenting the ‘right’ knowledge and provides the ‘right’ answer to a question. Often students are not trained to find their own path to an answer, tending to rely heavily on lecturers to structure the student’s learning in the classroom setting. Consequently, the use of WebCT communication tools for discussion gives students the dilemma of the lack of an authority figure in knowledge presentation. This requires an approach that will help eliminate the student’s dilemma, promote more thinking and give the student confidence in participating in discussions. McLoughlin & Oliver (1999) comment that ‘becoming bicultural is part of their adaptation to learning in tertiary study, and a prerequisite for academic success’. As the success of an online course depends largely on the level of interaction and means of communication employed between course designers and students, and the level of communication existing between the students themselves, learning to use the WebCT communication tools effectively becomes a must.

- **Infrastructure support**: If both the online resources and the communication tools of WebCT are to be heavily used, a fast network connection is a great advantage. Currently, slow Internet connections are still an issue that may or may not be solved, depending often on the circumstances of the student (while teaching in New Zealand, the authors were told of one case in which the student’s modem connection was via the wires that constituted the remote farm’s boundary fence). The proposed teaching model might have to consider alternative ways of achieving a high level of interactions and quicker access to teaching resources.

- **Classroom teaching**: Many students in China are used to classroom teaching and rather new to the concept of tutorials where they are expected to knowledgeably participate in discussions. Tutorials can be complicated by firstly, students not
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The proposed teaching model aims to rely on the same technical and human resources as employed at present, but impose a radical change to the design of the teaching activities with the objective of making better use of the existing resources, as outlined in Figure 1.

The conceptual teaching model reverses the role of WebCT. Instead of being regarded as an accompanying media hosting teaching resources for asynchronous access, it becomes the main delivery mode. To achieve this purpose, WebCT is not solely used as a host for static files, other WebCT modules are deployed, especially those that assist guided and continual learning and online assessment. These learning activities aim to better prepare students for tutorials and block teaching. As a result, tutorials can be used for extending students’ knowledge by peer instructions, and block teaching can focus on explaining key concepts, correcting misconceptions and on applications of the concepts. To assist this, moving the first block of on-site lectures from the beginning of the semester to a location during the semester may be considered.

WebCT

WebCT Campus Edition 3.8 is currently used by Utas to assist this offshore program. This version of WebCT provides tools supporting a wide range of activities for both staff and students. We intend to use three main types of tools in the design, aiming to support the online learning activities.

Communication tools

- Communication tools in this version of WebCT include discussion forums, email, chat rooms, whiteboards, group presentation and community building. Discussion forums are widely used in online unit designs as they allow for asynchronous discussion and query modes while still maintaining the sharing of knowledge and understanding. Instructors have the flexibility of designing the level of involvement for students and creating separate discussions for different groups with different questions. Posts can include attachments and URLs, so it is possible to let students discuss and reflect on a reading, and then apply these newly acquired concepts in another situation, thus aligning with the constructivist approach as stated by McLoughlin & Oliver (1999) who comment ‘Learning is situated and contextualised in action and everyday situations’. Discussion forums can be recorded, this allowing instructors to
track both students’ involvement and the quality of their contributions to discussions. This allows misunderstandings to be detected and clarifications can be made through a comment from the unit controller.

- E-mail is another asynchronous tool supporting communication. In a large class, it is preferable not to encourage emails from individual students to the lecturer. Students can be organised in groups, and told to only contact the lecturer when the others in their group also could not understand the issue in question. If a lecturer’s response to an individual’s query is useful to the whole class, it is recommended that the lecturer make it public.

- Chat rooms and whiteboard are synchronous communication tools. They both require a fast Internet connection. Whiteboards are often used when diagrams and formulae must be part of discussions. These tools allow students from different units to interact and create online communities and study groups at the system level.

- The group presentation tool allows an instructor to assign students to groups; alternately the tool can randomly create groups. Each group can have its own shared group presentation folder and discussion forum.

- Comparatively speaking, for most disciplines the discussion forum is the most popular of the communication tools discussed in this section (see Swallow & Slavin, n.d.). When using a discussion forum, the role of instructor is to post discussion questions and URLs (if any) and view the discussions on a regular (e.g. weekly) basis on a day pre-arranged with students. The purpose is to track students’ participation and build a database of key concepts easily misinterpreted. This database can be used as a basis for onsite teaching activities and an evolving test bank for the unit.

Assessment tools

- Peat (2000) notes that Entwistle et. al. (1989) have shown that “an important contributing cause of failure of first year students is an absence of feedback on progress”. WebCT includes quiz and self-test tools that can be used to provide self-assessment and give students feedback on their learning. These tools allow instructors to import quizzes from existing test banks and create test banks of their own. There is a difference between the quiz and self-test tools in WebCT. A quiz usually randomizes and uploads questions from a test bank. Students can take a quiz and once they submit, they are notified the result. But they do not know where they are wrong and why they are wrong. In WebCT a self-test is one prepared by the instructor to give students feedback on the student’s test results together with explanations.

Online readings and unit related notices

- The tools in WebCT that facilitate posting online readings include content module, single page and web page links. Content modules and single pages are mostly used to host static documents such as Microsoft Word documents, Adobe PDF files and spreadsheets. They provide the entry level use of WebCT, aiming at providing asynchronous access to lecture notes and other unit related instructions. If a slow or unreliable network connection is a problem, an alternative solution is to use CDs to host these files and create links in pages within the WebCT unit web site, thus bypassing the
necessity to download via the Internet. If CDs are used, multimedia files can be added to the resources to include more interaction and to maintain longer sustention. Another possibility with CD-ROMs is the inclusion of streaming media presentations that would allow training of students’ listening skills; the files involved in streaming media being generally too large to expect students to download over a connection that is not broadband.

- Web pages links provide a dynamic source of resources. Atkinson (2000) pinpoints the problem of students ‘being adrift in a vast ocean of information without any structured guidance’ and notes that ‘The amount of prescribed reading and associated activities should be reasonable in relation to the time required by other components of study in the unit’. Layering Web page links can help avoid these types of problems by allowing links to direct students to essential readings, while other more deeply layered links could lead to supplementary readings as a resource for more highly motivated students.

- Calendar and banner tools can be categorized as communication tools as they convey unit notices. But since they do not allow interaction, they are primitive tools only usable for limited communication. However, if effectively used, they can help to structure students’ learning process and notify students where they should be, and what is expected of them.

- The role of the instructor is to integrate the set of tools by creating links between them either at the beginning of the unit, or by creating the integration as the unit progresses.

Onsite Block Teaching

Slavin (2001) comments that ‘in a conventional lecture, 90% of the time is spent transferring information which the student can easily obtain from the written page, leaving only about 10% class time to spend on the areas which students traditionally find most difficult. It is better to focus on the difficult material and its integration with the students’ existing conceptual frameworks’. Students can easily do their own readings from their textbook prescribed for the unit if they are aware that the classroom lecture is no longer intended to do the summary for them and that this short cut to knowledge is not available. It is more pedagogically sound to let students do the reading earlier, and then use the classroom session to apply their understanding. The importance of this approach in a social situation is emphasised by collaborative theory, Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb (1999) commenting that ‘a key feature that distinguishes collaborative learning from individual and competitive learning is its social nature’, see also Reushle et. al. Both sources claim many advantages to this approach.

If students have not been previously exposed to WebCT, an induction course placed at the beginning of a semester is a must. McLoughlin (2000) summarises previous research and lists four skills needed for effective on-line learning; and notes that these cannot be ‘assumed in novice university students or those unfamiliar with learning on-line’. Typically, the induction course should guide students through the various WebCT tools used in the unit. The writers emphasise the importance of this course, as a major emphasis in this course design is the use of communication tools to facilitate cross-cultural learning. It is also critical to make students aware at the beginning of the course that participation is part of continual assessment. Students are mostly mark-oriented. Though it can be argued that it is not a good mechanism to ensure students’ frequent visits to the web site, it is certainly a very effective control mechanism. Use of the tools helps students to learn how to learn online; that is the focus of the teaching. It is a better use of time than going through the lecture notes, a process that often leaves many of the students at a loss.

If students have been previously exposed to learning with WebCT, an induction course may not be necessary. But this does not imply that students are expected to find their own way through the unit. Each instructor introduces different levels of use with WebCT tools. Students can be frustrated with different
templates and cosmetic aspects of an online site, let alone a different road map for each unit. Even though consistency is the goal of a corporate web site, this does not always happen in the real world. It always pays to give students some idea of the road map for a unit. It is also important to specify what is expected from the students enrolled in the unit. It is especially important that housekeeping issues are addressed when the instructor is physically onsite. E-mails and web announcements should only be used as contingent alternatives, rather than a crutch on which to be continually reliant. This approach requires the instructor to attempt to predict any possible problems, and plan well in advance how they will be handled if and when they arise.

In this plan, an on-site session that follows students’ online learning and structured discussion would be used mainly for problem solving and applications of the conceptual knowledge covered in the unit to that stage.

**Tutorials**

Mazur (1997) has noted the advantages of peer instruction when used in a traditional classroom environment. It is proposed to use this model of instruction in the design of tutorial activities. This mode of instruction complements well the model of on-line learning employed in this program design. Since the main instructor is away most of the time, the role of tutors becomes exceedingly significant. They are the immediate contact points for students. Tutors also require training that should include:

- Evaluation or specification of the required knowledge of the unit they are tutoring.
- Guidance as to the expected style of tutoring, which in this model is to stimulate thinking and encourage discussion rather than providing answers to questions.
- Another requirement that should be well articulated is the enforcement of using English as a language for communication.
- A detailed specification of their responsibilities, for example hours of onsite tutoring and online tracking of students performance, including the protocols for communication with the instructor in terms of what to report, the minimum frequency of reporting etc. This clearly outlined communication protocol keeps both the instructor and tutor on track and helps develop a proactive approach to problems rather than a reactive approach.

If a unit involves multiple tutors, the instructor has the additional responsibility to ensure that a consistent standard is followed.

In summary the integrated teaching model intends to make the three components of teaching (on-line delivery, block mode teaching and tutorials) more complementary and supportive of each other, with the intention of achieving a more effective learning experience.

**PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE INTEGRATED TEACHING MODEL**

- **Language skills:** The detailed design of learning activities using WebCT requires an active use of the language via reading and writing in academic English. This prepares students for exams and report writing in a non-intimidating and stress-free manner. As onsite teaching is not targeted at finishing the lecture notes, a more flexible and interactive teaching style can be adopted. This provides an opportunity for some students to interact with the instructor face to face using an academic vocabulary rather than social English. Students are also given the time to think and respond to challenges in an academic context. The design of unit activities develops students’ language competencies in all the four skill areas, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Briguglio comments that many overseas students have expression problems, quoting from one student ‘We’ve got the idea, we want to contribute but don’t know how to express it’. As listening and speaking are usually the weakest skills for a student learning English in a non-English speaking environment, using the onsite teaching session to encourage active listening and participation becomes all the more
valued. Otherwise, students could still end up with an ill balanced skill set in the language; such as that experienced by an Australian Ph.D. student of Chinese origin known to one of the authors (GF) who had superb English reading and writing skills, but whose spoken English was completely unintelligible even to other Chinese students. The proposed model aims to eliminate this sort of imbalance.

- **Interactive onsite teaching**: As online activities are carefully designed to structure students’ learning and provide feedback on their level of understanding as it grows over time, the onsite block teaching is no longer a time for learning new concepts. Students are better prepared for what they hear in class and they can understand more. McLoughlin & Oliver (1999) note that Lave & Wenger’s (1991) situation cognition work has shown that ‘learning is best achieved when it is encountered, used, applied in real world contexts’. If the on-site sessions are used to apply the knowledge to different real-world situations, the sessions become an extension and enhancement of student’s knowledge, resulting in a more understandable and enjoyable learning experience.

- **Multiple learning styles**: The integrated use of the three delivery modes across the unit supports the development of multiple learning styles. The embedded mechanism within WebCT to track students’ participation in online discussion and their quiz results is not an aim of itself. It is a means of checking progress towards another ambitious objective, which is to develop a new culturally sensitive collaborative learning style through the effective use of the three different and integrated teaching modes. The aim being that ‘this form of emancipatory pedagogy ensures recognition of students’ capacity to construct their own knowledge, bring prior experience and culturally preferred ways of knowing to the task and develop a sense of ownership and pride in their own knowledge’ (McLoughlin & Oliver 1999).

**CONCLUSION**

This paper discussed the design of a culturally sensitive teaching model that caters for both varied learning styles and helps develop collaborative learning styles through an integration of learning activities to be implemented in three modes of course delivery, online, onsite block course and tutorials. WebCT tools are fully deployed to support self-structured learning and assessment and to help build new learning skills. Classroom teaching sessions are used for extensions of knowledge through peer instruction and knowledge applications in a social real-world context. The design is proposed to address some emerging cultural, pedagogical and language issues discovered in a joint degree program between Utas and some Chinese institutions. Further research is planned for the implementation and evaluation of the proposed teaching model.

**REFERENCES**


