



Online Learner Support for In-Service Teacher Training in China

Chenggui DUAN
University of Hong Kong, China
cg.duan@hkuspace.hku.hk

ABSTRACT :

This Paper introduces the experience of an online in-service teacher-training programme in China. An overview of distance education institutions in China is given, that leads to a discussion of the importance of learner support. With respect to teacher training, various challenges are discussed ; student-generated problems, administrative problems, and tutor-generated problems. The Paper then analyzes the learner support problems occurring throughout this teacher-training programme, and makes suggestions for the further development of the programme.

1. INTRODUCTION :

‘Introduction to e-learning : a Sino-UK Distance Education Practitioners Online Training Programme’ was launched on 13 May, 2006. This 8-week online teacher-training programme is a result of the joint efforts by the experts both in the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom and several distance education institutions in China. The programme is essentially theoretical reflection and practical guidance on the implementation of online distance education and training within institutions. The purpose of this programme is to train the tutors of different online distance education institutions. This Paper sets out to describe and analyse the learner support aspects of this programme.

Distance education has undergone a huge and rapid development in the past several decades in China, especially the China Radio and Television University (CRTUVs) and Network Education Colleges (NECs). Meanwhile, more and more enterprises are

beginning to launch their training programmes at a distance or online. However, most organizations focus on the construction of learning resources while neglected the research and practice of learner support. Considering the British OU experience in providing ‘Supported Open Learning’ and their research results over the past three decades, it is worthwhile to cooperate with the OU and launch this pilot training programme.

2. METHODS :

2.1 Overview of the Distance Education Institutions in China :

Three generations of communication technology innovations have given rise to three generations of distance education to date ; - the first generation is correspondence education, the second is television and radio education, and the third is online education. There are now mainly two types of institutions in distance education in China ; -

the CRTVU systems, and the 68 Ministry of Education (MOE) authorized NECs. Generally speaking the RTVU systems belong to the second generation, while the NECs belong to third-generation distance education.

Over a long period of time, the ratio of people who can receive higher education has remained low in China. With many universities and colleges enlarged enrollment since 1999, the Gross Enrolment Ratio reached 19% in 2005, according to the Minister of Education. In 1993 however the figure is still only 5%. (Xinhuanet, 2006) Since there are over 1.3 billion people in China, there are many people who cannot yet avail themselves of the opportunity to further their studies after graduating from senior middle school. The enrollment enlargement in universities has reached a limit due to lack in qualified teachers and necessary facilities for further increase in student numbers. Therefore, some people argue that China needs to establish another 1000 universities and colleges to meet the demand for accredited higher education. This is almost impossible so the Chinese government is paying more attention now to the development of distance education.

Next here are brief introductions to the two main types of distance education institution in China :- the CRTVU systems, and the Ministry of Education (MOE) authorized NECs.

The CRTVU Systems :

The CRTVU system was set up in 1979 as a higher education institute directly affiliated to the Ministry of Education. It is oriented towards open and distance education throughout the country by adopting media such as radio and television broadcasting, printed books and materials, audio and video teaching materials and computer software.

The CRTVU system has since then always been the most important distance education provider, although it is regarded by society as inferior in quality to distance education provided by the conventional

universities. According to Ding (2002), by the end of 2002, 3.3 million students had graduated and received higher education diplomas from the CRTVU System, which accounts for 12.7% of all higher education graduates in the same period of time throughout China. The CRTVU System includes the (China) Central Radio and TV University CCRTVU plus 44 provincial Radio and TV universities. Both the central and the local radio and TV programmes are supported by books and audiocassettes and with local tuition. They offer over 70 specialities in 24 categories covering the 6 disciplines of the arts, the sciences, engineering, economics, agriculture, and medicine. Most students are organized for TV classes into groups in their work place, and they study alone if they are home-based and taking individualized programmes. The System is a single mode system with a national hierarchical structure of 5 layers. The 44 radio and television universities at the provincial level, in the autonomous regions, or in municipalities directly under the guidance of the Central Government, together with their 930 branch schools at the urban level, 2021 at the rural level, and 22,237 smallest sites comprise the largest distance education teaching system in the world.

The instructional media include printed material, radio programmes & audio cassettes; one-way TV programmes and video cassettes; and substantial face-to-face tutorials. In 1999, the Ministry of Education began an experimental project as a part of the modern distance education project, entitled CRTVU Personnel Training Mode and Open Education Experimental Plan. The CRTVU System is one of the national experimental universities to provide distance education. To date 2003, a total of 1.5 million students have registered at the CRTVU System, of the total 2.3 million registered students at all the 68 modern distance education institutions nationwide. Since each of the 68 NEC institutions – including the CRTVU System - adopts similar teaching and learning methods. This study describes the situation at the NECs – and this covers the teaching and learning methods at the CRTVU System.

The 68 NECs :

In 1999, the Ministry of Education authorized four traditional universities, including Zhejiang University, Tsinghua University, Hunan University, and Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, to launch modern distance education, which was characterized by the adoption of internet and multimedia technology to deliver learning programmes. To date the number has reached 68, and it's said this year 2008 the MOE will permit more traditional higher education institutions to establish their distance education colleges and provide distance education services if they want. China has now already over 1000 public universities and college. That means if all these higher education institutions run modern distance education in the near future, the importance of research on the issue of learner support within the context of distance learning will be undoubtedly more obvious. The development of modern distance education in China is summarized in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1 : Development of NECs in China

Year	Number of NECs	Enrolment
1999	4	9,000
2000	38	190,000
2001	45	607,838
2002	68	1,000,000
2003	68	2,300,000
2005	68	3,000,000

Like the modern distance education section of the CRTVU Systems, all the other 67 NECs are single-mode institutions "based on a distinct organization that has no involvement in the delivery of campus-based courses ... a separate faculty with a campus-based institution of higher education" (Richardson, 2000). These NECs include the best campus-based colleges and universities in China, which partly accounts for the explosion in enrolments from around 9000 in 1999 to about 3 million in 2005.

Understanding Student Support :

The students of traditional face-to-face teaching in classrooms receive most of their learning support directly from their teachers and fellow students. They have the 'sage on the stage'. The students in distance education in most cases are not so 'lucky'. When the need for support arises, what they have is mainly a 'guide on the side'. Therefore, it is difficult to understand what 'learner support' means to distance learners, especially within the context of China where students demonstrate a strong preference for face-to-face instruction.

The term 'learner support' can mean a variety of different things to different people. So it is important to try to define the meaning before moving on to the analysis of the current status of and problems with learner support in the pilot distance training programme.

Experts in this field have generated a variety of different definitions of 'learner support', and it is actually very hard to have an authoritative and unanimous one. Sewart defines learner support as the means through which individuals are enabled to make use of institutionalised provision. Learner supporters are 'intermediaries', able to talk the language of the student/learner and to interpret the materials and procedures of complex bureaucratic organisations (Thorpe, 2001). Simpson (2002) defines student support in the broadest terms as all activities beyond the production and delivery of course materials that assist in the progress of students in their studies. While the British Learning Association's (BAL) '10 steps to develop learner support' views learner support from a rather different angle, taking different situations into consideration (British Learning Association, 2005) ;

"In the corporate organisational environment that has adopted flexible learning methods often based on ICT, learner support may mean the application of the human touch in an otherwise technology-based framework to create a more socially-based activity. In an educational environment, learner support may mean making more

effective use of new learning methods and ensuring that the right staff are available at the right time to interact with students. In adult and community learning, learner support may refer to all the activities surrounding the recruitment and retention of ‘hard to reach’ groups and the issues of social inclusion.” (British Learning Association, 2005)

Ding’s (2002) definition is rather comprehensive: learner support services are the sum of all the services in terms of information, resources, personnel and facilities provided by the distance education institution or the teachers on behalf of the institution to the students, through face-to-face meetings or mutual communication based upon the technology media. This definition is rather all-inclusive and stresses the importance of interactivity in learner support services.

Thorpe (2005) defines “learner support as all those elements of an ODL system capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners”, which identifies the “key issue as interactivity between individuals known to each other”. This means that within the context of distance education, whereas teachers and students are physically separated, the interactions between the teacher and students, and the interactions between the students themselves should also be secured, from the student’s very first contact of the school till the completions of his/her study. This is not only a three-dimensional understanding of the learner support, but also expands the concept of learner support to a four-dimensional system that also includes the dimension of time.

And in an editorial, Moore (2003) provides his understanding of learner support, or learner support system, as

“The learner support system is the back-up safety net for the individual student who encounters difficulties that are either unexpected and idiosyncratic and so could not be anticipated by course designers, instructor, and administrator, or -more often- are difficulties that they know will occur but that can only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis because they cannot predict to which

individuals they will occur...the focus of the learner support system, unlike the design and administrative systems, is not on the mass of students but on the individual, because for that particular individual, a problem is likely to appear unique and to be critical, and failure to deal with it may well lead to that person’s withdrawal from the course and perhaps the total learning program.” (Moore, 2003)

These different experts approach the concept from different angles and they have given very illuminating understanding of learner support. Some of them are interconnected and mutual explainable, e.g. Ding’s classification of the 4 categories is actually a step further to Simpson’s all-inclusive definition ; while some of them are not so congruent, e.g. Moore pays attention to the needs of individual students while most other experts apparently not. These different understanding make any further analysis of learner support very complicated. We have to find one appropriate solution to analyze the learner support service of the pilot training programme within the context of distance education in China.

From previous descriptions of distance education in China, we can see that Chinese distance education institutions pay more attention to the problems of all students collectively rather than individually, so Moore’s definition of learner support system as ‘the back-up safety net for the individual student’ is very appropriate and has direct significance within the context of China. The following TABLE 2 shows the areas in which learners may need support by combining the research results of Moore (2003) and Thorpe (2005) as the framework for analysis of learner support in the pilot training programme.

From TABLE 2, we can see that a small modification has been made to Moore’s division of three types of learner support problems. Here the third one, i.e. the emotional problems are listed into the category of student-generated problems and another category has been added of ‘tutor-generated problems’. The cancellation of ‘emotional problems’ is easy to understand

TABLE 2 : Areas in which Learners may need Support

Student-Generated Problems
Learning from new media and technologies (e.g. computers and internet)
Improving study skills (e.g. reading online, etc.)
Interacting with and learning from the tutor and fellow students through distance
Constructing own knowledge with all the different resources
Overcoming the solitude feeling during studying
Understanding how they are to be assessed and by what standards
Coping with stress and time management
Learning motivation
Administration-Generated Problems
Recognising that they need to learn
Deciding what they want from learning
Deciding the best way of achieving it
Tutor-Generated Problems
Interacting with students through distance
Giving expert comment on how well the students are progressing

Drawn from Thorpe, 2005 pp52-53, and Moore, 2003

since these are generally students' emotional problems. This new term of tutor-generated problems may need expansion, since the tutor is expected to solve rather than create problems. In practice, tutors are not perfect and they will make problems, just like their students, especially within the context of China where there is no tradition of individualized tutoring in distance education.

2.2 The Pilot Training Programme :

Background Information :

The training programme involves reusing (translation) of material from one of the British OU's MAODE (MA in online, open and distance education) courses entitled H806 'Learning in the Connected Economy' without significant changes. Several OU experts, including Dr. Martin

Weller, spent their time on this transnational repurposing project, which "involves preparing courses for use by foreign institutions taking into account what size of course they prefer and their sensitivities to certain course material" (Thorpe, 2006). They have chosen the amount of learning objects that equals 5 weeks of online learning from the 100 plus learning objects of the H806 and re-arranged them to fit the need of the new and smaller programme in China. Meanwhile, Professor Ding Xingfu, a well-known expert in the area of distance education in China, was invited to write a unit that equals one week of study. This is mainly to alleviate the total foreignness of the contents of the training programme and make it more acceptable to ordinary Chinese students. At the end of the six weeks of online learning, there is planned another two weeks for the student to write an end-of-course assignment.

The Intended Audience :

At the initial stage, the intended audience is the practitioners at the distance education institutions across the country; including the 67 NECs affiliated to traditional campus-based well-known universities and the CRTVUs. A total of 40 teachers were participants for this pilot training programme. If the programme becomes more widely accepted, the intended audience will include the practitioners from the other four main part-time higher education colleges, i.e. the Adult Education Colleges, Continuing Education Colleges, Correspondence Education Colleges, and the Self-Taught Education Colleges. Meanwhile, with the rapid development of internet and computer technologies and their increasingly wider and deeper application in education, more private online educational organizations are becoming potential participants. These are employing more and more people to provide services that are related to the online distance education. The people from these organizations will soon need to be taken into account to further expand and develop the programme.

General Review :

From October 2005 to April 2006, with the advice from Chinese experts, several OU IET experts chose an amount of 5 weeks study-load from the H806 learning objects. The Chinese course team then translated them into Chinese and added one week study-load onto the OU ones.

Before the start of the programme in May, course materials and a learning support services system, including assessment scheme and assignments, Tutor's Handbook, and Study Guide for Learners were all carefully developed by the Chinese course team for the pilot project. These were designed to ensure the student-completion of the pilot project.

An initial face-to-face workshop was held in May 13th to 14th, 2006, and then online teaching based on a Chinese e-learning platform was delivered from May 15th to

June 25th, 2006. There were 35 learners who completed two assignments for the final summative assessment ; the last date of sending in Assignment 2 by learners was July 26th, and the last date of returning Assignment 2 by a tutor was July 31st.

At the end of this online training programme on July 31st, the course team then delivered a survey to the students about their attitude(s) towards this training programme. Also the tutors and course designers collected some useful information for the development of successive future projects. According to the final reports of the two tutors, the completion rate was 87.5% ; that is, 35 from the 40 submitted the final Assignment 2 and passed the assessment. Of these, 24 learners (60% of total 40) achieved an overall score of more than 75 /100 points. According to the results of the end-of-course survey, a majority of the learners (64%) were satisfied in terms of their own study of the course, and a large majority (76%) evaluated their classmates as satisfactory in terms of their study of the course.

All the course materials including Unit 6 on 'China's e-learning' were studied by the learners. They made distinctive progress in understanding the main concepts taught in the course. There were 19 required activities (4 compulsory plus 15 optional) and the total number of activities completed by all 40 learners was 559 ; thus on average, each learner completed 14 activities in all the 6 units. A majority of the learners (26 / 40, 65% of the total) completed more than 14 activities, and 58% completed all 19 required activities.

There were 1,787 notes in total posted up onto the BBS forum by all the 40 learners and by the 2 tutors, mainly in the 6 units and in the 6 weeks. Among them, 809 were original topics, and 978 were response postings. In this pilot project, the virtual coffee-shop had become a major part of the BBS for the online learners of the course by the class as a whole, and it was not used by small separated groups. Communications, interactions and collaborative learning were mainly realized in the coffee-shop, where there were 102 original topics, 508 response postings, and 4872 visits or browses in this

virtual coffee-shop during the course. That is, on average there were 5 responses and 48 browses for each original topic in the coffee-shop. These ratios are not too bad for a pilot project, taking into account there were only 40 learners in the class. Moreover, there were some posting of critical thinking and creative recommendations. As a result, a large majority 76% of the learners ranked themselves as 'very adaptive' or 'adaptive' to the online learning strategies.

2.3 Learner Support Analysis :

From the description above, we can see that most of the students regarded their study experience with this pilot programme as satisfactory ; with 64% of them feeling satisfied in terms of their own study of the course, and a large majority 76% (19 of the 25 who provided data) evaluating their classmates as satisfactory in terms of their study of the course. To further investigate the effectiveness of the learner support provided, this programme is analysed according to the framework shown above in TABLE 2.

Student-Generated Problems :

Concerning the student-generated problems, there were 40 students initially from either the CRTVU system or the NECs. Irrespective of the organization, according to Ding Xingfu (2002, p371) these students share the following common characteristics, which need to be taken into consideration in the design of any programme ;

- They are accustomed to the teacher-centered instruction model. This model is the traditional teaching method in the past several thousand years in China and is scarcely challenged by other pedagogies.
- They prefer to be organized into a class and are not accustomed to study by themselves.
- They are inclined to memorize the

information of the course instead of finding ways to get the problem solved. In China the teacher usually first teaches the student the general principle and then asks them to apply these principles to analyse and solve the problems they encounter. This is very teacher-centered and what the teacher is expected to do is to disseminate the knowledge.

- They demonstrate a strong reliance on the teacher. Actually Chinese students usually urge the education institutions to launch the face-to-face tutorials otherwise their learning needs cannot be satisfied, even if it is only to listen or watch the teacher on the TV screen.
- They show a lack in critical thinking and innovation. In the learning process, Chinese students rarely comment and criticize their fellow students' points of view, still less to challenge their teacher's.
- Their external motivations are stronger than their internal ones. Most of them are choosing distance education out of the need of their career development or getting promotion and salary increase, and they consider less about the development of their ability.

From these characteristics listed above, we can see that the Chinese students tend to be taught instead of constructing the knowledge with all the different resources. They regard the teacher (or tutor in this situation) as the source of knowledge. What is more, although they have been working in the field of distance education for many years (58% of them have over 3 years' work experience), still 88% of them have no formal experience of distance education themselves. Consequently, quite a few students asked about where to enter their user name and password on the homepage, and where to write down their messages in the conference area. Of course, most of the students knew these things.

Taking these considerations into account, we organized a compulsory face-to-face session and required all the 40 students to participate in this to resolve the above individual problems and to provide some

gentle transition to the required new learning style. The face-to-face session helped to resolve the problems of learning from new media and new technologies very well since all of the students read online and successfully posted their messages into the conference area : the most prolific contributor posted 192, and the least prolific posted only 7. After a telephone talk with the student who had posted the fewest messages, she told us it was because of time conflict with her job since June and July were when their new students had to be recruited, and therefore she had to travel away from her computer a lot for that purpose.

But this pilot training programme failed to arouse some students' enthusiasm to make deep discussion about the content of the learning programme. This is partly because of Chinese students' unwillingness to criticize or even comment on other students' messages publicly. The most enthusiastic messages were posted actually inside the coffee-shop - generally where students could discuss non-academic topics. The message with the most responses was about a game of fixed Chinese sayings. This was a good way for them to establish close relationships with other students and thus can help overcome the solitude feeling of learning alone. But from these phenomena we can also see that these students still did not engage the learning. They were just waiting to be told what to do next and then only did what had been told by the tutor. So they still did not know how to construct their own knowledge through different resources, including through their interactions with their fellow students. And the programme failed to provide individualized support to those students on how to overcome these difficulties.

Administration-Generated Problems :

The second category of problems are related to the administration system. Since we had an initial face-to-face session and since almost all the learning materials were available to them online, there were no problems in distribution of content.

However, there were some administration problems, including ;

- Recognizing what they needed to learn,
- Deciding what resources they will need, and preparing these,
- Designing the course website, construction, and maintenance.

The administration system is mainly composed of the experts from the British Open University, the course coordinator, the course website constructor and the Chinese academic expert.

The original purpose for designing and providing this pilot training programme was to let Chinese practitioners have a taste of OU courses. So our OU experts choose some learning objects from the master level course H806. These are very good ones, but considering the level of the students, most of whom are middle or even low level staff, many students undoubtedly felt the programme was a little more advanced than they had initially expected.

For the course materials (since H806 is almost purely online, with only two set books), we put all the chosen LOs online and provided two similar books on distance education written in Chinese. But since the LOs and the two Chinese books were not well matched, so the students failed to find many correlations between the books and the coursework.

Other administration-generated problems involved the course website.

As this is an online ODL training programme, a well structured course website is very important. The website should be well designed for ease of navigation by the students and the tutors, and adequately provide additional sources of course information, including a study calendar, related text articles, a virtual conference area, and so on. Actually, the website became the major platform for our student support during the whole training programme. One minor problem with the platform is that the conference area cannot show what messages have been read and what have not. This caused some extra work for the tutors to know whether each message had been read or responded to.

Tutor-Generated Problems :

The other third category of problems is of problems generated by the tutors. These kinds of problems are rarely discussed, since the tutors are expected to solve problems arisen during the learning process, not create them. However, this is an important category and should not be overlooked.

We had 2 tutors for these 40 students. One tutor is from Tsinghua University and the other is from Beijing Foreign Language Studies Universities. Both are assistant professors and have been working in the field of distance education for many years, although it is their first time to provide support to students online.

These two tutors spent quite a lot of time to familiarize themselves with the contents of the programme before the start of it. When it began in May they worked very hard on the tutor-marked assignments (TMAs) for the students. The TMAs are an essential and characteristic component of the teaching-learning-feedback system at the British Open University. But partly because of lack in experience and partly because of lack in confidence, the two tutors posted few messages of their own to the conference zone : one wrote 153, and the other only 90. And the contents of these messages were mainly non-academic. When asked about this, they responded that they were hesitant in case they made any mistakes in commenting on or correcting any student message. In fact the students were quite dissatisfied about this issue since they felt that the tutor did not show adequate concern over their questions.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS :

The importance of learner support to the success of a distance education programme and institution is well recognised. In fact it is one of the most critical elements as Moore (2003) points out. Therefore, although this pilot training programme has finished, considering the situation of distance education mentioned above, a general review of the learner support side of

the training programme is undoubtedly very necessary and helpful for any possible future similar programmes, since some experience and methods can be directly applicable for informing improved design in following programmes, and so that any shortcomings and negative aspects can be better avoided next time round.

From the descriptions above, we have paid special attention to the learner support services during the programme and we aimed to have overcome the problems generated by the students, by the administration system, and by the tutors. According to the end-of-course survey and analysis, we can see that all learners (100%) regard this pilot course as useful for distance educators, including their colleagues in their working institutions, and they would like to recommend their colleagues to apply for studying this programme in the future. That is, the China-UK collaborative program of master courses of ODE meets the needs of the Chinese market of distance education, and they are reasonably satisfied with the learner support services provided - otherwise they would be more hesitant in recommending it to their colleagues.

But, there are still many problems with this programme, and further improvements are needed.

Firstly, the course materials and learning support services system need to be designed and developed more systematically by more experts and with more practitioners involved. More resources are needed related to the course programme, especially resources in the Chinese language. And the activities need to be more practical and effective for studying the course. The platform-based communications and the interactions should be strengthened further. These are mainly administrative problems that need to be resolved.

Secondly, since through this pilot training programme we found that there is a market for such training programme we can design a series of training programmes in this area. But before that, a fuller market research is needed to estimate the time available and work-load for learners and tutors in China, e.g., how many activities could be finished

properly by learners each week on average, and how many hours could be spent by tutors for participating in communications and interactions online in the e-learning platform each week and in marking the assignments. Based on the experience of this pilot project, it may be suggested that some activities are removed in order to allow more time for the learners to enjoy communicating, interacting and their online collaborative learning. However, this problem mainly concerns the tutor, and tutor time.

Thirdly, as the pilot course has a general subject of 'Introduction to e-Learning', some following courses could be on more specific subjects for practitioners of distance education in China. For instance, instructional system development for an e-learning system at a distance ; design and development of course materials for e-learning at a distance, especially the design of activities in text and assessments ; supported online collaborative learning mode and strategies for learning support services ; and a quality assurance system and evaluation of e-learning at a distance. And the course team needs further training on how to provide satisfactory learner support services from different angles. This is also an administration problem.

And fourthly, there are suggestions for how to help overcome the learning problems of the students, especially here in this programme where they are Chinese adult students. More effort and time are needed for the students to overcome all their problems listed in the above framework, such as how to learn from new media and technologies. In order for better understanding the problems facing the intended students and thus lessen possible difficulties, a more thorough investigation of their support needs will be very helpful.

Chenggui DUAN is a Research Associate, at the Centre for Research in Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (CELL), School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE), of the University of Hong Kong, Units A & B, 12F United Centre, 95 Queensway, Admiralty, HKSAR, China. Email : cg.duan@hkuspace.hku.hk, Telephone : 852 2975 5823, URL : <http://research.hkuspace.hku.hk/eng/index.html>

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