Participative eLearning Framework for a China - Australia Undergraduate Degree Program

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Abstract

The common understanding within the education sectors of both China and Australia is that students undertaking an undergraduate degree in China would be taught in a traditional didactic model, and in large part this is the case from having had first hand experience. While this might currently be true, there are efforts being made to move this scenario to a more participative model where students and academics in both countries make use of electronic learning environments for discussing issues, tackling problems and working collaboratively to research solutions and knowledge. This paper suggests a participative eLearning framework and an action research inquiry methodology for actioning such an extensive program implementation.

Key Words

China and Australia learning environment, participative eLearning framework, action research inquiry.

Introduction

The adventure begins in the mist of time when a university in China was investigating partnering programs with universities around the world for one or more of their major studies. The objective was in the first instant to investigate undergraduate programs that could be collaboratively taught and co-credentialed, that is, students would study in the home institute and also in the partner institute with credit being granted by both institutions for subjects studied and upon completion of the undergraduate program would be granted degrees from both universities.

The Chinese university was in due course introduced to a potential partner in Australia through a visit by a university delegation from China. Two years have elapsed since that visit, and reciprocal visits have been made, agreements have been signed and the first students are entering the program in China in September 2002. The first two years of the program will be conducted in China with the finishing years taught in Australia.

The common understanding within the education sectors of both China and Australia is that students undertaking an undergraduate degree in China would be taught in a traditional didactic model, and in large part this is the case from having had first hand experience. While this might currently be true, there are efforts being made to move this scenario to a more participative model where students and academics in both countries make use of electronic learning environments for discussing issues, tackling problems and working collaboratively to research solutions and knowledge. This in part brings together constructive and generative approaches together with a community focus, that is, a community of learners.

To achieve the desired outcomes we have designed and begun to implement both an electronic learning environment (in Australia at present), teacher training and mentoring in the discipline major, and academic and student awareness programs to progress from the
didactic approaches to a participative approach over a four year period and as the program is developed and delivered. Typically collaborative learning has been implemented between students however, we are using a holistic paradigm that includes academics and students. This has not been without difficulty within the Australian institute and has never been tried within the Chinese institute. It becomes an even more challenging environment, for a program involving both academics and students in the one learning space, drawn from two different cultures and learning paradigms. There are multiple dichotomies, and therefore multiple opportunities for both academics and students to develop their understanding, not only of the course content but also of the numerous communication skills required for learning in this new intercultural and electronic environment.

**Participative Model**

The proposal of a participative model in its fullest implementation envisions self-actualising self-directed learning, where self-actualisation in participative environments seeks to develop community. The two ideas, self-actualisation and self-direction, may seem to be in opposition at first but in fact self-actualising learners draw upon and contribute to community and in enacting individual knowledge do so in cooperation with there social and cultural basis. To understand this concept and the way such an enculturation operates the following detail is provided from an earlier paper by Calway (2002).

Enculturation is used as an active and holistic verb where a sustained cultural context is envisaged. We cannot at this point see a universal constructivist culture, however, we do:

- Provide and investigate examples (artefacts and people);
- Encourage and orchestrate student/student, educator/student, educator/ educator interactions; and
- Directly research, encourage and teach the model espoused through action inquiry.

Tishman et al. (1992) spoke of enculturation this way when they suggested that teaching by enculturation is holistic in nature and that this model subsumes the traditional instruction models rather than replacing them.

Enculturation has developed from a goal of self-actualised learning as a social construction that results from complex processes of reforming and improving the education activities. This social construction is measured through change, where changes come from the rhythmic effort of combining theory and practices involved, making the changes and reflecting on what has been learned. This is typical of a community-based approach used by education researchers undertaking community-based and/or systematic construction (cf. Stringer, 1999).

Self-directed learning (SDL), (cf. Knowles, 1975; Houle, 1984; Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990) affords a number of connotations, from learners motivated in a prescribed and dependent study through to learners generating their study material and path of learning. The former suggests a strong use of dependent learning with the learner environment generating a high degree of directed action. Whereas the latter is far more self-actualised learning where the learners construct the topic, time, place and pace. Therefore, there is a discernable pluralism as:

- Self-motivated, self-directed learning – where the learners take an active part in a structured learning environment. An environment that encourages subjective interpretation of learning within a stimulus contextualisation. It is interesting to note that motivation was not a
competency of the original SDL competency measurement instrument
developed by Knowles (1975, p61). NOTE – it is this enculturation that
is adopted as the starting point for the China – Australia program.

- Self-actualising self-directed learning – where the learner creates a
  learning path in accordance with an individual action to create a context
  or influence an extant context (i.e. construction, Bruner, 1960, 1986,
  1990). It is this enculturation that is envisaged for the longer term
  sustainable China – Australia participative learning environment.

In essence, the two points above are similar in that the learner is making an individual
response to learning within a wider social construction of learning. However, it is the later
point that is seen as the ideal.

There exists sufficient anecdotal observations of the China – Australia relationship to suggest
that, on the whole students possess a prescriptive and deterministic nature (i.e. they may be
self-motivated but are far from being self-directed) that would be anticipated for a traditional
dependent learning paradigm (cf. Grow, 1991/1996), reflected in the lower left quartile of
Figure One below.

![Figure One: Learning Responsiveness – Adapted from Grow (1991/1996) (Source Calway and Turner, 2002)](image-url)

Why the above description is important in describing the China – Australia learning
partnership is that we cannot expect institutions or students to behave as dependent and
traditional students one day and as a self-actualising self-directed learning community the next (as in the upper right quartile). Neither can we expect the academics to function as didactic teachers/instructors one day and collaborative participants the next.

Therefore, as a first step in a long journey it is envisaged that a dependency will remain but that academics would move first to guidance then facilitation as the enculturation through which the implementation of the participative learning environment progresses.

Partnerships – Shared Journeys

The participative partnership acknowledges the cultural requirements and variances of both countries within the course of studies. For example, Chinese students entering an undergraduate program must complete Military training as part of their course, among other requirements determined by the Chinese Ministry for Education. These requirements are not difficult to incorporate into the degree program but they do highlight the considerable flexibility required by both academics and students when considering the learning environment. Equally there is a closeness provided, firstly through the use of the Internet and secondly through a minimal international time difference. What is difficult is to provide a learning environment for the program that recognises the dichotomous learning pedagogy of both cultures and institutions. It must be recognised and acknowledged by both parties that unless students are aware of the learning environment they are entering then difficulties can be expected. Managing expectations of academics and students will be a key driver of success in making this transition to being a collaborating community of self-actualising and self-directed learners (academics and students).

Therefore as an active response to such a paradigm, the partner universities will be engaging in participative learning enculturation and during the next four years will enact an action inquiry approach to that development. Such an approach will enable research of the learning community that is occurring and will enable actions to be taken in the likely event that shortcomings will occur. Stringer (1999) provides a descriptive community-based action research model that centres around four overarching principles. They are relationships, communication, participation and inclusion:

- Relationships in action research should
  - Promote feelings of equality for all people involved
  - Maintain harmony
  - Avoid conflicts, where possible
  - Resolve conflicts that arise, openly and dialogically
  - Accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be
  - Encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive, conflictual, or authoritarian relationships
  - Be sensitive to people’s feelings

- In effective communication, one
  - Listens attentively to people
  - Accepts and acts on what they say
  - Can be understood by everyone
  - Is truthful and sincere
  - Acts in socially and culturally appropriate ways
  - Regularly advises others about what is happening

- Participation is most effective when it
  - Enables significant levels of active involvement
  - Enables people to perform significant tasks
- Provides support for people as they learn to act for themselves
- Encourages plans activities that people are able to accomplish themselves
- Deals personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents

Inclusion in action research involves
- Maximizing the involvement of all relevant individuals
- Including all groups affected
- Including all relevant issues – social, economic, cultural and political – rather than a focus on narrow administrative or political agendas
- Ensuring cooperation with other groups, agencies, and organizations
- Ensuring that all relevant groups benefit from activities

(Stringer, 1999:42)

Initiating the Program in China

In June of 2002 negotiations were completed for the joint development and co-credentialing of a Bachelor of Business (eCommerce) program. The program has provided complexity for both universities and as Zhuang records, (from 2002 contributed notes):

“After signing the agreement, China university has done a lot in detail. Because of the difference between the two sides in teaching system and style, it will depend on the cooperation and correspondence between both sides to complete the project. What China will do is especially hard.

1. Amending and Perfecting Teaching Plan
   According to the agreement, this side should open 8 courses during the first 2 years after students enter the school. Considering Chinese requirements about courses, in order to be in accord with the agreement and Chinese requirement of students training at the same time, it is necessary to amend and perfect the former plan.

2. Establishing and Perfecting Teaching Facilities
   Establishing and perfecting teaching conditions and test facilities is one precondition to ensure the project can be established successfully. According to students training requirement, to create ideal teaching and testing conditions, this side has improved multimedia classrooms and rearranged test facilities and will buy simulating e_business software.

3. Training Teachers
   Teachers who teach courses in this project must have full teaching experience, professional competence and excellent listening, speaking and writing ability. According to the special requirement for teachers, this side will pay more attention to training. Nowadays, this side will assign two teachers to study graduate courses and be trained totally in Australia. When they come back, they will lead other teachers to improve specialty teaching. Other teachers will study or be trained in China.

4. Training Students about English
   This project adopts the mode ‘2+2’. It is said that during the first 2 years, students study in China, and the books they will use are original edition of English, the teaching language is English. So, the English level will extremely affect the teaching results. In order to help students reach the requirement about studying abroad, this side decides to strengthen English training based on the average English level of students, focusing on listening and speaking ability.
5. Improving Teaching Style

Instead of traditional style (teacher talks, students listens), this side will adopt mutual-touched and case-based teaching style, through debates, to develop students’ thought and improve students’ abilities of analyzing and resulting questions, and to make students adapt to the major style of international education.”

Conclusion

The above comments by Zhuang are not just isolated to the Chinese partner university. The very same type of comments can be made of the Australian university as well. Both academics and students involved in this program at both universities will be making a significant transition and will learn from each other throughout the experience.

Developing the eLearning resources, timetables, combination classes, shared projects and making room for other commitments will require giving attention to detailed and adaptive plans. Facilities in both universities must support the eLearning and face-to-face components of the course. Transformation of the role of the academic will be profound and not without challenge, it will be continuous and dependent on the shared learning journey with the students. Academics will need training opportunities and a heightened readiness to learn new skills in managing the learning environment and expectations, in developing effective intercultural communication and building active learning relationships. Learning in relation to content, context and context will be balanced as the transitions occur and the different English language background of the students accommodated in dynamic ways that enhance learning.

However, the point to highlight is that within this complexity both parties to the agreement are partnering to provide a holistic and constructivist learning environment for both students and academics that are prepared to enter a participative learning community.

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