

# 'Empowering Online ESL Learners'

## Reflections on the experience of developing an existing undergraduate course from a classroom-based to a predominantly network-based environment

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"... distance education requires more than a software package that allows an institution to offer coursework online. In any setting, whether academic, organizational or corporate, it is critical to remember that *people* are using the machinery that makes the course go. The human element, therefore, will inevitably play a role in the electronic classroom" (Paloff & Pratt, 1999)

### Introduction

This project focused on the design and delivery of an existing elective course in Advanced Reading and Writing in English for ESL learners for final-year BBA undergraduates at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). I am the curriculum designer, materials writer and the course coordinator for this course (LANG 304 - see <http://lc.ust.hk/~courses/304/> for the course description and objectives).

### Context

I work in quite a strong didactic educational environment; not just within my institution but within Hong Kong and Asia as a whole. A context that is probably typical of most tertiary institutions around the world in terms of teaching philosophy in that it follows what is basically a transmission model approach to teaching and learning (Pratt, 1998). This approach is also taken in schools from a very early age and in Chinese culture it has a strong tradition and history.

As a result, students have quite strong and fixed ideas about 'effective' learning and teaching; one where the teacher is seen as a 'master' (to use the literal translation from Chinese). Students very much expect to be told what to do and do not expect to have to make decisions about their own learning. This teaching-learning context is difficult for me personally as it conflicts with a lot of my own beliefs about learning and teaching, creating tension when as I try to help these Hong Kong students move towards being both self-directed and interdependent (i.e. peer supported and supporting) learners.

### The Project

In this action research project, I wanted to investigate a number of issues associated with the process and outcomes of transferring a face-to-face course to an online environment. Specifically, I wanted to:

- Find out the extent to which my espoused beliefs match my beliefs-in-action
- Find out about the extent to which students expectations can be moved towards assuming more learner responsibility and self-managed/self-directed learning

- Experiment with implementing portfolio-based assessment which I believe is more congruent with my own beliefs about learning and teaching
- Find out what one group of learners perceive as the benefits and drawbacks to learning in this way
- Become aware of some of the key processes involved in transferring a classroom-based course to an online environment and some of the major pitfalls to avoid in doing this

In doing this, I needed to:

- Identify some of my own beliefs about learning and teaching and their relationship to theory
- Design the course so that it matched my beliefs as far as possible given the constraints of the contexts within which I work
- Implement the course and observe the changes I made in response to the learners and circumstances as they unfolded.

### **Personal Learning Theories behind the course**

Both the face-to-face and online courses were based on social constructivist learning principals (Lave, 1991; Laurillard, 1993; Crooks, 1994). In the online course, I particularly wanted to enhance these principals which are based on three main strands:

- *Cognitive approaches* (particularly Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory) which emphasise the importance of what the learner brings to any learning situation as an active meaning maker and problem solver. Thus the learner takes centre stage.
- *Humanistic approaches* (particularly Rogers, 1982; Kolb, 1984; and Schön, 1983) which emphasise the development of the whole person in learning/educational settings.
- *Social interactionist approaches* (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978 and Feuerstein, et al., 1991) which emphasise the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners and learning tasks and provides a view of learning as arising from interactions with others. From this, I believe that learning never takes place in isolation and recognise the importance of the learning environment or context within which learning takes place.

## **Course Design, Delivery and Evaluation**

### *Design of a four-week intensive online course*

In order to empower the students and foster self-directed learning, as well as increase interest and motivation, I had students take more responsibility for their own learning by designing a course which asked students to make decisions about:

- The course content
- The types of learning tasks/events they engaged in
- What was assessed
- How it was assessed
- The criteria used in the assessments
- Who would do the assessing

In order to foster reflective learning, and to facilitate students' awareness of their own learning styles and preferences, I incorporated learning journals and portfolio-based assessment.



In order to facilitate community building, to foster peer learning and to cater for different learning styles, I included cooperative and collaborative tasks, along with individual tasks. By cooperative tasks, I mean ones that were done individually but which had feedback from peers right the way through. By collaborative tasks, I mean ones which were done as a group with a shared and agreed group goal. For these collaborative task, the students self-selected their groupings dependent on mutually shared interests and goals.

In order to enrich their learning in a way that is not generally practical with face-to-face classes, the students were grouped within the computer conference so that intra- and inter-class communication was possible. The latter of these would only happen informally (if at all) in a face-to-face learning environment.

In order to make them more aware of the resources, students used online library databases supplied by the educational institution as well as business and current affairs magazines available for free on the Internet.

And finally, to meet the course objectives, I included learning to learn skills, critical reading skills, seminar skills and business writing skills.

After devising this plan, I felt a lot of trepidation, as I 'knew' from past experience that giving Asian students this amount of choice is usually interpreted negatively as meaning that the teacher hasn't a clue as to what she/he is doing. With all my face-to-face courses, I ask students to make collective decisions in terms of course content and processes. However, I generally do not do this until about half way through, when I feel they have 'gelled' as a group, have trust in each other and have trust in me in providing them with a conducive learning environment; a place where they feel valued, respected and supported, a place where they can safely take the learning risks that come with successful foreign/second language learning (perhaps any type of learning).

### *Delivery*

A total of sixteen students enrolled on the course. A number of conference areas were set up for the students so that different types of interactions could take place:

- All students
- Two groups of eight students who met in the face-to-face seminars for posting seminar articles and discussing anything relevant to the face-to-face class as a
- Four groups of four students for the main learning work of the course; critical reading (and associated vocabulary), seminar and business writing skills. The smaller groups of four people were set up so that reading and responding to peers' work did not become overwhelming while at the same time maintaining a reasonable level of interaction. I believe that this balance between the level of interaction versus information/work overload is a key issue for asynchronous networked collaborative learning.
- Individual student areas for learning journals and any private discussions with the facilitator

### *Evaluation (by participants)*

The comments highlighted above were also born out in the students' summative evaluation of the course. They were asked to complete an online summative questionnaire of mostly open-ended questions covering seven main areas and this had a 75% response rate (i.e. 12 out of 16 students).

### Students' perceptions of the affordances and barriers to their learning

It would seem that students generally felt that a key component of the course was the opportunity to learn from peers and the role the computer conference played in facilitating this. They also believed that the course materials and the instructor aided their learning.

However, they felt that campus connection facilities, particularly HKUST's limited number of modem lines and the time restrictions computer services place on a continuous connection hindered their learning the most. Other key factors that hindered their learning included outside commitments, self-management, computer literacy, ESL literacy and the intensive workload within the time frame.

### Students' perceptions of areas to retain and improve

25% of the students suggested that everything should be retained. Most students commented that the self-directed nature of the course, the mix of online and face-to-face delivery, peer commenting/feedback and the writing and seminar skills also should be retained. One student also stressed retaining student choice over seminar topic and responsibility for seminar preparation in order to ensure "student effort".

In terms of changes, there were no major agreements. Individual comments included improving the navigation of the computer conferencing system, giving online course participants a 'priority' connection to the campus, submitting the portfolio as a word-processed document and not a hypertext one, and either reducing the workload or giving longer deadlines for the writing tasks.

### Affective reactions both before and during the course

Prior to the course, most students felt a mixture of excitement and worry for the same reason; namely that they had never experienced an online course before.

After the course got going, students' positive feelings intensified a little with most students feeling excited and eager as they realised that everyone was as committed to the course as they were, and the course met their needs and wants. Although they were concerned about the demands of the course from its intensive delivery, they saw this as a positive challenge. However, negative feelings associated with their ability to technically cope in terms of computer literacy still persisted.

Students who started out with positive feelings at the beginning of the course felt these did not change. Students who initially had negative feelings felt that these either decreased or were eliminated as they went through the course. The reasons for this included:

- the course being very "active", "interesting", "funny" and "not boring";
- the small class size;
- the relevance of the content to their needs and wants;
- the encouragement and support from the facilitator;
- enjoyment in learning through this medium, and
- their ability to "take the initiative to learn and participate".

### Student's perceptions of their degree of control over the course



Students' perceptions ranged from a reasonable amount of control to a high degree of control over course content, task type and assessments. Comments that demonstrate this understanding and show students perceptions of a high degree of student control include:

"In the writing tasks we can choose what we want to learn and what the topics are for the seminars"

"The course content is quite flexible"

#### Students' perceptions of the reflective learning tasks (learning journals and learning portfolios)

For the learning journals, students' reactions generally were positive; feeling that the journal pushed them to think about what they had learnt and they valued the opportunity to reflect. As one student says:

"It's useful to keep recording what we have learnt so that we can evaluate our learning at the end of the course."

However, two students did mention that they found it difficult to write the learning diary. This was either because they weren't sure of what they had learnt at the end of a particular day, or because they felt that the high workload of the course did not give them enough time to reflect.

With the portfolio-based assessment, most students felt that it aided the reflection, retention and consolidation of their learning. But one or two felt that it was very time consuming or that they needed clearer guidelines for the portfolio construction.

The students' web-based learning portfolios can be viewed online at <http://lc.ust.hk/~courses/304/portfolios/>

#### Students' reactions to the delivery timing and pattern

All students felt that running the course in the summer when they had less commitments was a good idea. It was generally felt that the course would be better offered as a 6-week intensive rather than a 4-week one, while retaining the same workload. However, one student's comment has stuck with me as it has really made me question my 'flexibility' with students in my normal face-to-face teaching as well:

"I remember that some of our classmates think the schedule is tough before. I don't think so. Because we should expect this before we take this course. This is a 3-credit course and condensed to a very short period. And therefore should have very tight schedule. I think may be you should not be so lenient in delaying the deadlines of our homework."

### Students' assessments of their time commitment

This ranged quite widely from 10 hours per week to 40 hours per week; although most were around 20 hours a week in total with about 60% of this time being allocated to reading and writing in the computer conference.

### A 'catch all' to ensure that everything the students had wanted to say had been covered

There were only a few responses received for this and of these most were complimentary. However, one student made a number of suggestions concerned with getting more feedback from me which was a little disheartening given one of my main objectives was to increase students' self-directedness.

## **Lessons Learned**

At the start of this paper I gave a number of issues that I wanted to look into in undertaking this project.

### To find out the extent to which my espoused beliefs match my beliefs-in-action

- *Increase opportunities for student choice*

I feel I ran the course with a high degree of teacher control. Whereas previously I had believed that I allowed a lot of student choice and freedom for the learning-teaching context I work within, I now am not sure and question this personal assumption and will need to investigate it through a small-scale action research project. I need to look into a number of areas here:

- To what extent am I really affording self-managed learning for my students?
- What is my place as a teacher in providing 'task's for learners?
- What is my role in a partly or largely self-managed programme in this respect?
- What does it mean to provide tasks in my (or any) learning context?
- Who decides on what a task might be, and why?
- Is it possible that when I decide on tasks, learners then have to spend time trying to understand what I was trying to get them to do by carrying out the task; they'll work towards my agenda, rather than perhaps their own?
- Is it that when I suggest a task, the students inevitably want to know why the task has been chosen, and inevitably they want to re-define it in ways that make meaning for them in their situation?
- Is there any benefit of ever suggesting a 'task'?
- Is there more a need to provide a context where learners can define their own tasks, so that they "own" them and have brought personal meaning to them?

The questions we raise about how each of us defines 'task' in a different way, their meaning and who decides and why, is a constant tension for all teacher-facilitators. A tension between what we'd like to do and how we have to work within the constraints of our varying, layered contexts (institutional, departmental, colleagues and learners).



To find out about the extent to which students expectations can be moved towards learner responsibility and self-managed/self-directed learning

- *Students can be moved quite far along the path to self-directedness in their learning when their context does not militate against this.*

I generally think that this group of learners moved considerably towards learner independence and interdependence. But, as they say, a key factor in facilitating this transition was doing this course without the pressures and demands of simultaneously studying other subjects that continually send signals opposing self-directed, empowered learning.

To experiment with implementing portfolio-based assessment which I believe is more congruent with my own beliefs about learning and teaching

- *Continue to use portfolio-based assessment*

This is one part of the course that I felt was a real success and I have now made the production of a learning portfolio (along with learning journals) the assessment method for this course but have allowed the submission of a paper version for those who prefer this.

To find out what one group of learners perceive as the benefits and drawbacks to learning in this way

To summarise these briefly:

- *Benefits*
  - ⇒ learning from peers facilitated by the computer conferencing system
  - ⇒ the course materials
  - ⇒ the instructor
- *Drawbacks (hindrances)*
  - ⇒ campus connection facilities
  - ⇒ competing demands (other courses, summer vacation work, etc.)
  - ⇒ their lack of self-management
  - ⇒ their computer literacy
  - ⇒ their ESL literacy
  - ⇒ the intensive workload within the time frame

To become aware of some of the key processes involved in transferring a classroom-based course to an online environment and some of the major pitfalls to avoid in doing this

- *Planning*

One thing I feel I have learnt is that taking a course online requires a lot more planning in terms of structure than I ever had anticipated. This is not the same as having lots of tasks for the students to do but is about constructing an open and flexible structure for students to work within.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, I believe that following an action research cycle when moving to online learning and facilitating not only engenders learner empowerment, but also engenders teacher

empowerment! I think it engenders teacher empowerment because as a teacher I feel greater ownership of the course as a result of the 'issue' identification, reflection, implementation, and evaluation spiral process. At the same time, I think it engenders learner empowerment because you tend to incorporate the same action learning process into the course design for your students' learning with tasks that ask them to make choices, implement them and then reflect on, and learn from, the perceived outcomes of those choices.

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