

## **Development and support for the Global eTeacher**

### **Summary**

This article will address the role of academic staff development in preparing university teachers to work effectively within the changing boundaries and missions of their institutions. We need a growing number of global eTeachers who can work across time and culture zones with reasonable ease. The article is based on both my experiences of 10 years of academic staff development at three large Australian universities and the recent experience of applying and adapting these experiences during the establishment of a staff development and research centre within a university in Hong Kong with a strong Chinese cultural ethos.

The article suggests that the following principles are important for all universities, no matter what the cultural setting:

- Conversations about the direction of change should be meaningful and inclusive.
- The establishment of local projects at departmental level is more effective than only providing university-wide development and training programs.
- Expectations on individual staff need to be realistic.
- Establishing and maintaining teachers' motivation for eTeaching is vital.

### **Bio**

Carmel McNaught is Professor of Learning Enhancement at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her previous appointment was as Head of Professional Development in Learning Technology Services at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. Carmel has 30 years experience in teaching and research in higher education, and has worked in eight universities in Australasia and southern Africa in the discipline areas of chemistry, science education, second language learning and higher education. Current research interests include evaluation of innovation in higher education and understanding the broader implementation of the use of technology in higher education. She has over 180 academic publications.

Email: [carmel.mcnaught@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:carmel.mcnaught@cuhk.edu.hk)

URL: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/clear/staff/staff7.htm>

### **Article**

A global eTeacher is one who can work online across time and culture zones with reasonable ease. What skills are needed by an effective global eTeacher? Skills in designing and teaching online courses as well as a broad understanding of the meaning and implications of cultural diversity are needed. Most university teachers have not been trained in, and usually are not rewarded for, these skills. So, how complex is the task and what might be possible strategies?

### **How easy is it to adopt eLearning?**

A recent national study in Australia (McNaught, Phillips, Rossiter & Winn, 2000), found that the issues surrounding the adoption of eLearning in Australian universities are complex, and no single factor will result in adoption. Instead, there is a range of policy, culture and support factors, all of which must be addressed before eLearning is widely adopted in an institution. Before looking at how teachers might be best supported in becoming effective eTeachers, the question of the impact of globalisation on the level of complexity of this task needs to be considered.

### **Globalisation and eLearning**

Higher education rests on the premise that student learning can be facilitated by operating in a planned environment. Basically not only does the curriculum need to be planned, the nature of the total student experience over, usually, a period of years needs to be considered if curriculum alignment is to occur and result in demonstrable benefits for students. Educational design is essential for facilitating effective learning. What about the 'online' or 'e' aspect? The learning process is not different (after all, students are still people with the same neural pathways), but several other things have changed dramatically in recent years.

1. Firstly, the global partnerships in higher education mean that various perspectives on knowledge need to be negotiated.
2. Also, there is an increasing diversity in the students who enter post-secondary education. This diversity covers academic motivation and orientation, linguistic and cultural background, prior educational experiences, learning styles and approaches to learning.
3. Thirdly, these students interact with teachers who have diverse approaches to and beliefs about teaching and learning.
4. Fourthly, there is increasing diversity in the learning contexts students enroll in; these might be workplace learning, studio-centred learning, programs with intensive block teaching (often across national borders), cross-sectoral programs and tailored industry-related programs.
5. Finally, the technology itself means that there is an increasing range of tools and strategies for us to use in designing programs and courses.

### **Understanding our learners: The 'paradox' of the Chinese learner**

As an example of the need to think more broadly about our students, I will describe the 'paradox' of the Chinese learner: despite being educated in large classes, within a rigid curriculum with a predominance of norm-referenced assessment, Chinese learners often outperform Western students. Watkins and Biggs, in their seminal books on the Chinese learner (1996) and the Chinese teacher (2001) describe how the general culture outside the classroom impacts on academic learning. Briefly, these cultural impacts are:

- Memorisation and understanding. Chinese learners use memorisation as a strategy to explore meaning and not just as a reproductive process.
- Effort versus innate ability. The emphasis within Chinese culture is that effort is paramount and so all students have a reason to strive.
- Intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. These are not mutually exclusive but are seen as intertwined for the Chinese.
- General patterns of socialization. Respect for elders, groups norms and the need to invest time in learning are emphasized from early days in Chinese culture and hence repetitive school tasks are not seen as boring.

- Achievement motivation: ego versus social. The centrality of family in Chinese culture provides a social framework which encourages all children to succeed and give face to the family.

Chinese teachers are able to work with these cultural characteristics to design orchestrated environments within which students can achieve deep levels of understanding. The ‘paradox’ only exists when Chinese classrooms are viewed with totally Western filters. This is not to say that Chinese pedagogy is superior to that used in the West. There are clearly problems with the rigidity and pressure that exists in schools in Hong Kong and mainland China. However, changes need to be made with an understanding of these cultural factors.

### **The role of staff development**

To what extent can staff development assist the process of university globalisation and, in particular, can staff development support the production of a large pool of global eTeachers?

Staff development can no longer be a pleasant ‘cottage industry’ on the fringes of academe or the enthusiastic enterprise of a few individuals supported by ‘soft’ money. Effective staff development is positioned at the centre of university functioning and yet needs to retain connections with the needs and perceptions of teaching staff. This is a demanding challenge. Staff development programs that are successful in meeting the needs of complex modern universities need to be supported strategically (and financially) by their own universities.

One example to illustrate how individual growth can dovetail with overall strategic directions is a recent academic staff development program run at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. A Learning Technology Mentor (LTM) program at RMIT ran from mid-1999 to the early part of 2001. The LTM program provided for 140+ academic staff to have one day per week time release over one semester, in order to:

- learn how to use the University’s recently established online education system,
- design and implement online learning in their faculty’s education programs (many of which were international programs), and
- promote and support similar activities among colleagues in their departments.

The aim of making a significant investment in learning technology mentoring by academic staff—rather than establishing a specialist online design and production unit to service them, for example—was to achieve widespread adoption of online learning as part of effecting a change in the culture of academic work. Extended time release of more than one semester was required to achieve useful outcomes in some cases. Over this time, in several faculties, a network of individuals developed that remained after the formal end of the program (McNaught, 2003).

### **Principles for staff development for the global eTeacher**

To sum up, then, certain principles emerge as being essential for the development and support of global eTeachers.

- Conversations about the direction of change should be meaningful and inclusive.
- The establishment of local projects at departmental level is more effective than only providing university-wide development and training programs.

- Expectations on individual staff need to be realistic and work loads need to be explicitly negotiated in any proposal for change.
- Establishing and maintaining teachers' motivation for eTeaching is vital. Basic training in the use of technology needs to be combined with conversations about the vision and possibilities of globalisation within higher education. Having teachers who are engaged in their eTeaching is an essential pre-requisite for having students engaged in their eLearning.

## References

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This paper is a very brief version of:

McNaught, C. Supporting the global eTeacher. Best Paper Award at eLearnInternational2003. World Conference Edinburgh, 9-12 February.