

Encyclopedia of Distance Learning

Volume II

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Effective Technology–Mediated Education for Adult Chinese Learners

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INTRODUCTION

This article will address several areas relating to online learning and technology. We will report on work done in the development of four models that have been used to deliver effective professional development for adult learners. The courses are run in Taiwan from a base at Feng Chia University in Taichung, and all the attendees are Chinese. The key content is developed by instructors who are all native speakers of English from a range of countries. Some of this key content is delivered face-to-face and some is delivered virtually. Course facilitators are experienced in online learning and are Chinese. Our models thus utilize both internationally known teachers and local expertise. In addressing the training and education development needs of adult learners in a Chinese context, we needed to consider and accommodate three types of challenges:

- the constraints and demands on busy adult learners;
- the challenges of second language learning; and
- the use of technology-mediated distance education.

Each of these areas is challenging and complex in its own right. Many of the contributions in this encyclopedia will address one or more of these areas in some depth. This article should be considered as complementary to those focused contributions. Our globalized world is complex and multifaceted, and this article attempts to show how the

application of knowledge and experience in several areas can be combined.

BACKGROUND

Adult Second Language Learners

There is a vast literature on adult education. Recurring themes in this literature are that adult learners are often more motivated than younger learners and come to a specific educational program with relatively clear goals in mind. They can also often relate course material to their own work settings and thus internalize and adapt knowledge in a way that can be immediately useful in the workplace. However, there are several problems that adult learners face. These include the need to juggle time constraints so that the demands of the educational program can be fitted into busy professional lives and family commitments. Adult learners, even those in senior positions, may no longer be accustomed to the discipline of structured educational offerings; many comment that it has been a long time since they were on the “education conveyor belt.” Finally, when technology is involved, many adult learners have lower levels of confidence in becoming accustomed to and using online forums and Internet searching. All these factors are well documented, for example, in Jarvis (1995) and Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997).

The adult learner who is working in a second language faces additional challenges. Spack and Zamel (1998) argue that the conventions, concepts, and terms that a teacher uses in any classroom

creates a unique subculture, and successful learners are those who learn to read and interpret this culture. If the language nuances are not understood, it is very difficult for learners to work effectively. The level of English in Taiwan is not high (Yiu, 2003), and so this challenge needed special attention in the design of courses. Contributors to Duke (1987) echo this need and provide some local examples of successful practice in China. These examples all highlight the need for building flexibility into the design of educational programs so that the needs of individual learners can be met; in the language of constructivism, so that there is adequate scaffolding for all learners. These learning needs include both linguistic and cultural factors that are often difficult to define a priori; hence, the need for ongoing facilitation and negotiation. Chang's (2004) study of different strategies adopted by adult education trainers in the United States and in Taiwan clearly demonstrates the primacy of the factor of cultural negotiation.

Ensuring that Technology Facilitates Learning

It is quite curious that early Web-based teaching appeared to be regressive in that the drive to put materials “on the Web” led to a didactic environment. However, we seem to be moving out of this phase now and the communicative power of the Web has come to the fore. There are excellent guides available now about how to support eLearners in communicating online and developing meaningful online communities. The five-stage model of Salmon (2004) is useful in this regard. She discusses the importance of first ensuring good connectivity and motivation, then setting up online socialization, before there is any real academic information exchange or knowledge construction that might lead to more permanent ongoing development.

Table 1. Models for technology-mediated education for adult Chinese learners

Model	Development of key content	Facilitation of learning	Use of technology
1	Developed by international instructors in English. These instructors act as resource experts at a distance.	Two tiers of local facilitators, one group working in Chinese and one group working bilingually. Complex questions are fed back to the international instructor as needed.	100% online. These are called eWorkshops. See Figure 1.
2	Developed by international instructors in English who come to Taiwan for face-to-face (F2F) classes	Less reliance on the formal tiered system as there has been bilingual facilitation in the F2F classes. The role of the local facilitators is to bridge the gap between international theory and practice and local institutional environments.	F2F supplemented with the use of a learning management system (LMS). See Figure 2.
3	Developed mostly by international teachers in English. Saved digitally for use by local instructors. Some guest speakers come to Taiwan.	The nature of the F2F classes change with the possibility of more Chinese explanations being available for difficult English material when the local instructors are teaching.	F2F supplemented with the use of a learning management system (LMS). More F2F than in model 2. See Figure 3.
4	The development of eLearning course materials into a repository that can be produced on demand. Here there is a key role for the Library in the management and coordination of the course materials production. Constant revision and updating is also an important component. This is an adaptation of the concept of just-in-time course development and delivery-on-demand in a variety of formats (print, CD, online).	The design of each course can be customized to the group of learners. The mix of virtual modules, local instructor-led F2F classes, and international guest speakers can vary as needed.	Materials incorporated into an LMS. Balance of F2F and LMS as appropriate. This model enables a flexible blended use of technology. See Figure 4.

Mature designs for online learning make use of the multiple functions of the Web and the art lies in using an appropriate mix. McNaught (2002) matches common online facilities such as forums, quizzes, upload areas, and the like to the four major functions of communicative interaction, conducting assessment and providing feedback to learners, supporting progress through a formal program of study, and providing resources for students to use. Alexander (2001) comments that such attention to detailed design must also take into account teachers' peda-

gogical beliefs and the nature of the student population. So, again, we highlight the need to have flexible, adaptable models and designs (Blass & Davis, 2003). As noted earlier, adult learners may find online learning more daunting than younger learners (Cahoon, 1998) and so the need for careful, supportive, flexible designs is even more important.

Figure 1. Architecture of eWorkshops (Model 1)

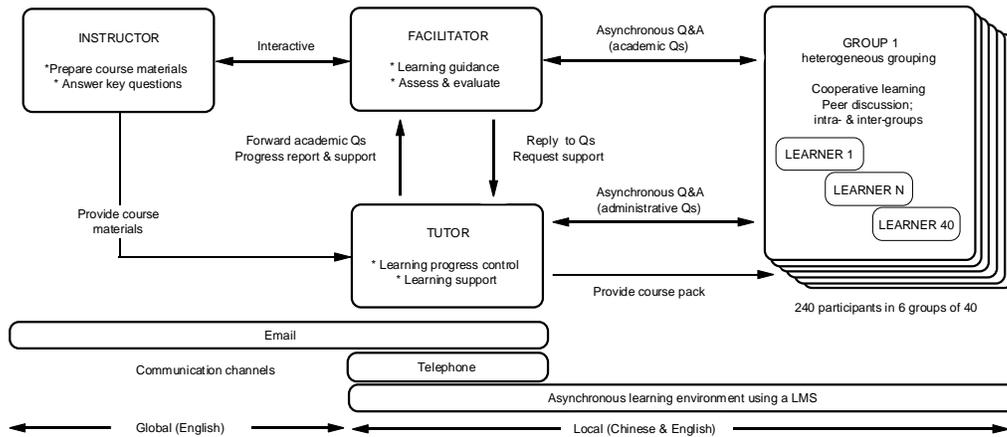


Figure 2. Model 2

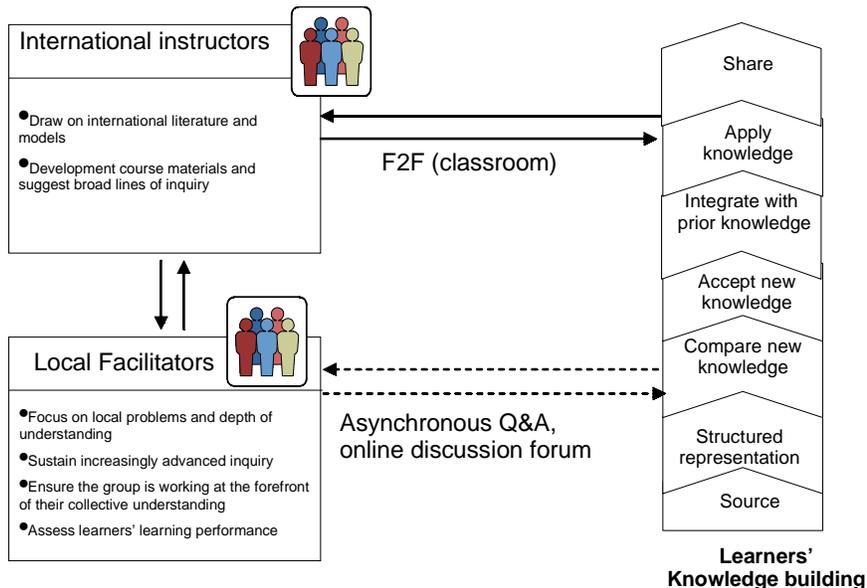


Figure 3. Model 3

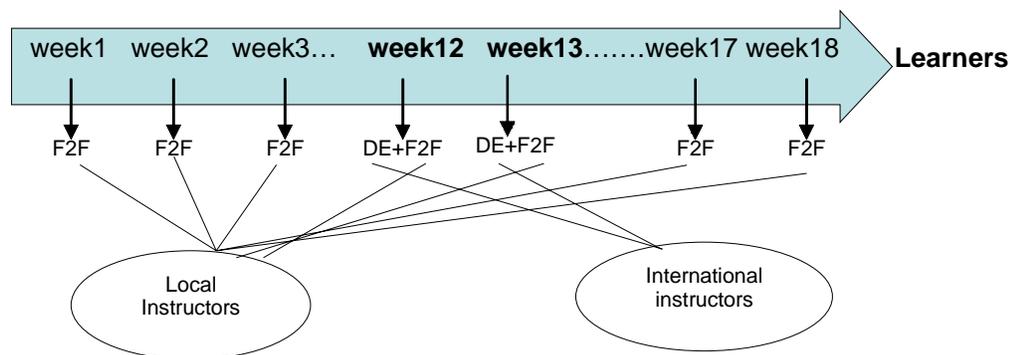
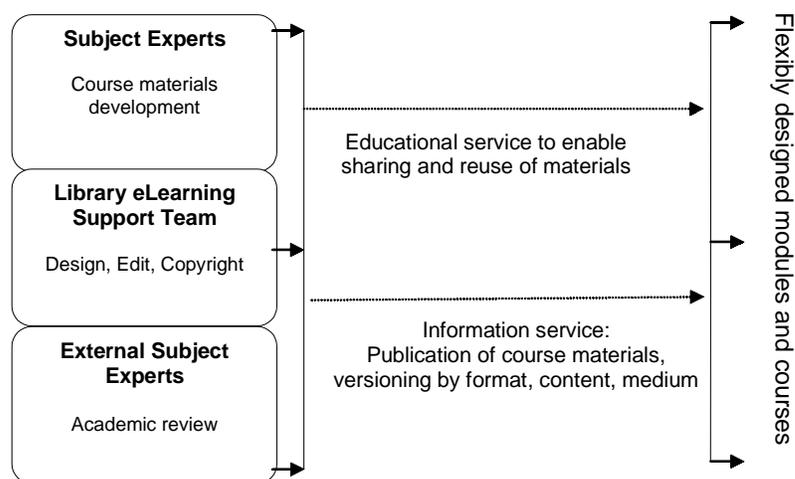


Figure 4. Model 4



THE FOUR MODELS

These four models have all been used in Taiwan in various professional development courses for adult learners. They are summarized in Table 1.

Model 1

Model 1 was developed during the time of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in the first half of 2003 and was used by 180 participants learning about e-learning management and design (Ching, Poon, & McNaught, 2003). These virtual eWorkshops were developed rapidly, to replace a face-to-face international conference that

had to be postponed because of the SARS epidemic. It was gratifying that the whole process ran so smoothly. The seven international instructors from Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and the United States produced course packs that included narrated presentations and a course reader in English. The tiered support system used for the online discussions involved a Chinese-intensive discussion at the first level, with questions being referred to more experienced online facilitators with good bilingual skills. If necessary, the questions could be translated into English and sent to the international instructors. The data from the evaluation of these eWorkshops is reported in Ching, Poon, and McNaught (2003) and is summarized briefly in Table 2.

Table 2. Successes and challenges from the use of Model 1 during the time of SARS

Key Successes	Key Challenges or Ideas for Improvement
Participants found the eWorkshops interesting, attractive and relevant.	More case studies using a variety of media in the eWorkshops and more thought into the design of discussion questions would be enhancements.
There was a synergy between the eLearning administrative and strategic research group, the learning support team, and the technical support team.	Despite the success, a more continuous monitoring and reporting system is needed to assist with both administrative issues such as scheduling, and technical hardware and software problems. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section on the Web site would be useful.
This model is relatively cost effective	Eventually, the interaction between participants and facilitators needs more attention if the model is to be truly effective.
Participants from all over Taiwan have successfully cultivated a sense of community by learning through LMS.	Time for study was a key challenge for these learners.
A pool of participants' contributions was built up that can be shared with peers or other interested persons to stimulate scholarly thought.	Several participants did not contribute their own thoughts in the forum.

Model 2

Model 2 was used in the period February to May 2004 for a three-credit postgraduate-level certificate course with 50 participants also learning about e-learning management and design. A sandwich arrangement was used, with two modules being run as full-weekend intensive sessions followed by a month of online activity, then two more weekends of more advanced modules and another month of online activity which, at the time of writing, is just concluding. Midway through the course an evaluation was carried out. The richness of the face-to-face weekends has been appreciated. But it has been hard to sustain the “high” of these weekends into the forums. Many of the participants have very senior posts in Taiwan and a sustained commitment to online discussion has been very hard to maintain. It is interesting that the online activity level during the SARS eWorkshops was quite high. Maybe isolation has its advantages! Also, the time of the SARS outbreak was a time of heightened awareness of the benefits of technology, and the commitment to using technology was high (McNaught, 2004). It has been valuable for the Taiwanese team planning professional development for e-learning to have the experience of these two models in action and become aware of how societal dynamics impact the success of the implementation of a model.

Model 3

Model 3 has been used in teaching different topics than e-learning. One example is a graduate-level course on local economic development run for 18 students in 2003 by the College of Construction and Development at Feng Chia University. The intensive teaching by the international instructor occurred over a two-week period in June. She had prepared the course materials in the United States and sent a CD to Taiwan. She was then available online during that time. Local instructors used the LMS to facilitate students' learning by narrowing the gaps of language, culture, and institutional difference between the United States and Taiwan. The face-to-face component was an off-campus learning and field trip that tested the U.S. principles in a Taiwanese context. This use of an international instructor is more cost-effective when long distances are involved.

Another example of Model 3 where the international instructor came to Taiwan is a module on population and development in East Asia that ran in the Spring semester of 2003 with 48 students. The international instructor works in Hong Kong. He prepared the course materials in Hong Kong and then came to Taiwan to present his lectures, which were recorded. He also discussed the operational issues of the online course with the local instructor.

When travel costs are low, the dual benefit of having the international instructor present in Taiwan and also having a full set of course materials can be achieved.

The final example of Model 3 highlights the need to maximize the value of international instructors who have skills that are rare in a particular country. There is no law librarian at all at Feng Chia University and, consequently, there has never been an information literacy course unit specializing in law. A module on law library research in comparative and international law has been developed in a similar way to the previous example, except that in this case the international instructor from Hong Kong also trained the reference librarian at Feng Chia University so that she could run the course again using the recorded lectures and other course materials developed by the international instructor.

In all the three models presented above, a growing number of courseware modules now exist in Taiwan. Provided the quality of production is adequate, it doesn't matter whether the production of course materials occurs overseas (Models 1 and 2 and first example of Model 3) or in Taiwan (second and third examples of Model 3). This growing repository of materials has led quite naturally to the development of Model 4, which we believe represents a more pragmatic and cost-effective use of local and global expertise.

FUTURE TRENDS

Model 4

We believe that Model 4 represents the model of the future. The e-learning infrastructure for Model 4 is the same as for the other models. The initial development of new modules for the repository is a partnership between an academic department and the Feng Chia University Library. The design of the course and payment for any local or international instructors resides with the academic department, as does the costs of any copyright clearance. Rules for instructional design, copyright advice, and suggested publishing plans are given to the department. The actual materials production and continued management of the materials occurs in the Library. The publisher is the FCU e-press. An example that

shows the potential for reuse of this model is the topic of economic development in Greater China. This topic, which is in line with the strategic focus of Feng Chia University, has been explored in a regular focus forum for some time in the College of Business with various invited speakers whose presentations have been recorded and who have been generous with providing suitable readings. The materials have been packaged so that they can be reused in modules for the American Institute in Taiwan training professional U.S. ambassadors coming to work in China. There is a potential for sales in this case to other businesses or political parties interested in this topic.

The reuse of materials produced under Model 4 requires careful instructional design so that the resources are tied to suitable discussion questions and tasks for the participants in the educational program. Also, an appropriate use of facilitators working in both Chinese and English needs to be included in the plan. Reuse often fails when the resource materials are not embedded in an appropriately designed learning environment (Littlejohn, 2003). Tu and Twu (2002) noted that a lecture-oriented mode of distance education has been dominant in Taiwan. The integration of skilled facilitators as a key element in all the four models is a move to address this situation.

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CONCLUSION

In this article we have tried to show that there is a diversity of models that might be of use in developing educational offerings for adult learners in a bilingual environment. Trying to get the right balance across all three areas of technology use, culture and life style demands of the learners, and language levels and needs has been a truly fascinating challenge.

We feel that the multi-faceted nature of our models may well be of value to colleagues working in a range of transnational educational ventures in this globalized world.

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KEY TERMS

Adult Education: This term is used to show awareness of the reality that many adults come to formal educational programs with different orientations to study, motivations, and prior experiences from younger learners. These differences need to be accommodated in the learning designs used.

Bilingual Learning Environments: Learning contexts where two languages are needed. Often this is because the course content is in English but the learners are not fluent in English. Discussion and exploration of meaning occurs in a language other than English. Translation is needed before questions can be asked of any international instructors (see below) involved in the teaching.

Bilingual Learning Facilitators: Tutors and local instructors whose first language is the same as the learners, but who are reasonably fluent in English as well, and also familiar with the content domain. These facilitators have a major role in bridging the gap between the international instructors and the local learners.

E-Press: A publishing service with a strong emphasis on the publishing of digital courseware. This does not mean that print and traditional media, such as film, are not used. However, the courseware packs are predominantly electronic.

International Instructors: In many regions of Asia and Africa, professional development programs rely on expertise from elsewhere in the world, and there is heavy use of experienced invited speakers. Increasingly, these invited speakers provide electronic resources and also teach online. They may even do all of their teaching in an online mode. These invited teachers, many of whom teach in English, are described as international instructors.

Technology-Mediated Distance Education: In many distance education programs, technology has assumed a central role. As in any educational situation, the relationships of significance are between teachers and students. The use of technology can facilitate or mediate this relationship. In this sense, technology provides strategies to bridge the gap between, or bring closer, teachers and learners.

Transnational Education (TNE): This term has arisen to describe the type of educational program that involves organizers, and usually teachers, from more than one country. The phenomenon is not new, but the rapid growth of TNE and the financial and cultural implications for educational institutions and teachers in both countries are significant. There are many arrangements that TNE can take, a few of which are described in this article.