

Staff perceptions of online learning: Five cases from a teacher education setting in Hong Kong

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This paper discusses a research project that examines academic staff perceptions of online learning in a teacher education setting in Hong Kong. Five academics from Hong Kong's leading teacher education university participated in the project over 18 months. The academics ranged in experience from first time users of online learning to experienced users. Five cases examine the use of online learning in a blended mode (all modules taught at the Institute are predominantly face to face teaching and learning). One of the aims of the project was to obtain perceptions of online learning from staff members from the Departments of Chinese, English, Information and Applied Technology and Physical Education and Sport Science (two staff). The five staff members were generally positive about their use of online learning. In particular, the online learning environment provided opportunities for student reflection, peer editing, students learning from each other and also provided another avenue for teacher student and student teacher feedback.

Keywords: staff perceptions of online learning, feedback, teacher student interaction, student teacher interaction

Introduction

The Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIED) is a dedicated teacher education University and one of eight higher education universities within Hong Kong. The HKIED "offers a range of programmes leading to the award of certificates, first degrees and postgraduate diplomas, which provide suitable preparation for a career in education and teaching in the pre-school, school and vocational training sectors; and also offers a series of programmes which provide professional education and development for serving teachers in these sectors" (HKIED Strategic Plan, 2004/05). Within the Institute there are currently twelve Departments in the areas of: Curriculum and Instruction; Creative Arts; Mathematics; Information and Applied Technology; Early Childhood Education; Chinese; English; Educational Policy and Administration; Educational Psychology, Counselling and Learning Needs; Science and Social Sciences. There are approximately 325 academic staff and 700 non-academic staff on campus. 70% of modules are taught in Cantonese and 30% of modules are taught in English. There are approximately 8,000 full time and part time students. All modules are taught in the face to face mode.

The Institute has a relatively short history in relation to the use of online learning. The Institute began utilising the NextEd platform in 2001 and in September 2003 the Institute adopted the Blackboard Multilingual version to enable teaching online in both English and Chinese. There is no emphasis on completing full online learning modules and it has been mainly pioneers in the Department of Information and Applied Technology that have led the way with the initiative. The Centre for Integrating Technology in Education (CITIE) is now responsible for the coordination of Blackboard and provides administration in conjunction with Information Technology and Services (ITS), support, training, module development, investigates enhancements and conducts research on online learning. In addition the principal author is Executive Secretary of the Information Technology Strategy Committee which has just allocated grants to each department to develop partial online modules for their department staff and students. This role of the principal author also needs to be taken into account within the research project as he has a position of influence in relation to technology within the Institute as well as being the primary investigator of this research project

In Semesters 1 and 2 of 2003/04, approximately 70 academic staff were involved in each semester utilising the online learning platform with approximately 140 modules each semester. Over 3000 students are involved in utilising the platform in each semester. Three departments on campus have been highly active in using some form of online learning and offered 77% of the modules taught online during semester 1 and 53% of the modules in Semester 2. The CITIE is encouraging other departments to utilise online learning by assisting in module design and development, presenting interactive training workshops and conducting research projects to both understand the nature of online learning at the Institute and inform academics about staff and student perceptions in relation to online learning. In addition only about 50-60% of the modules offered online utilise discussion forums which suggests that many modules utilise the online learning management platform for delivering content as opposed to utilising the unique features of asynchronous and synchronous discussion forums within the system. In addition only 20% of the modules taught online utilise the group pages functions in the Blackboard learning environment.

Research aims

Five academics from HKIEd participated in the project over 18 months. Five cases examine the use of online learning in a blended mode (all modules taught at the Institute are predominantly face to face teaching and learning). The academics ranged in experience from first time users of online learning to experienced users. One of the project's aims was to obtain perceptions of online learning from staff members from the Departments of Chinese, English, Information and Applied Technology and Physical Education and Sport Science (two staff).

The research goals for the project were essentially interpretivist in nature although a number of key principles are currently being developed. These principles will guide future work in this area and are essentially development goals. "Researchers with interpretivist goals are focused on portraying how education works by describing and interpreting phenomena related to teaching, learning, performance, assessment, social interaction, innovation, and so forth" (Reeves, 2000, p. 6). There were five research aims of the project, of which one will be examined in this paper. The first aim was to investigate online learning in five blended teaching and learning modules. This was initially undertaken to provide the principal investigator with an in-depth understanding of the nature of online learning at the Institute. The second aim of the study was to analyse the discussion group messages over one semester in five modules offered at HKIEd. An adapted model based on Henri (1992) and Gundawardena (1998) was used to analyse the discussion messages. The third aim was to determine student perceptions of online learning. A focus group was held with 3-5 students in each module during the semester of the taught module. The fourth aim was to obtain an insight into the general teaching style of the academic by observing a face to face class. In particular the principal investigator was interested in observing learning activities and student student and student teacher interactions. The fifth aim, to be discussed in this paper, was to determine staff perceptions of online learning through interviews with the principal investigator. One interview was held with the five academics close to the beginning of the semester and one interview was undertaken at the conclusion of the semester. The interviews with the academics provided one of the richest sources of knowledge in relation to their perception of online learning.

Background

Koschmann (1996) suggests that we are "currently witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm in IT research" (p. 10). He further suggests that this newly emerging paradigm is built on the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and communication science which focus on language, culture and the nature of the social setting. Koschmann (1996) suggests that Computer Supported Collaborative Learning is concerned with questions such as "how is learning reflected in the language of learners and how do social factors enter into the process of learning" (p. 14). It is based on observational data and focuses on process as opposed to outcomes and descriptive studies.

One of the fundamental changes that needs to occur when teaching in the online environment is that the role of the instructor needs to change to optimise the affordances of the technology. "In effective online learning, the instructor acts as facilitator, encouraging students to take charge of their own learning process" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 125). In other words the teaching and learning needs to become a more shared experience. The nature of content also needs to change to providing resources and activities for students to allow discussion, critical thinking and knowledge construction. The student's role also

changes to take some responsibility for their own learning. Reflection and self assessment need to be more prevalent and accepted by the student. Discussion is paramount in the online environment.

Teacher perceptions of technology also appear to be key factors in the successful adoption of learning technologies. In addition, when learning technologies are considered to be part of the teaching approach they are seen to be more readily integrated. “The individual is more likely to use the technology if they see their applicability to their situation and methodology, and adopt and adapt as they fit” (Simpson, 2004, p. 2). This suggests learning with the technology as opposed to learning from the technology (Jonassen, Howland, Marra, & Marra, 2003). When technology is seen as a tool to assist the learning process it appears to be more readily adopted and integrated by academic staff.

It is suggested that although online learning environments offer a number of advantages, “these opportunities also increase substantially the time and energy required of faculty to achieve the potential of online learning environments” (Myers, Bennett, Brown & Henderson, 2004, p. 79). However faculty who experiment with online learning environments may become better teachers as they may reflect on their teaching and also initiate more dialogue with other teachers on the potential benefits of various teaching methods (Myers, Bennett, Brown & Henderson, 2004, p. 79). Myers, Bennett, Brown & Henderson (2004) also found that “the largest effect on a faculty’s perception of OLEs occurs when faculty’s reason for teaching the course is *to develop new teaching skills*” (p. 83). “Educational technologies may open new avenues for more students to access opportunities and information, increase forms of interactions among teachers and students, and encourage collaborations across institutions” (p. 84).

The methodology for the study

The methodology outlined below was completed in the research project.

Stage 1	Research questions: Development of research questions for the study
Stage 2	Literature review:
Stage 3	Survey of online modules: Survey (Blackboard analysis) to determine the range of courses at HKIED that utilise discussion groups as one part of the total module experience
Stage 4	Selection: Identification of five modules in which discussion groups were utilised at HKIED
Stage 5	Pre-module interviews: one interview with the instructor/lecturer during the teaching of the module
Stage 6	Observations: One observation of a face to face class setting
Stage 7	Focus groups: One face to face ‘focus groups’ with students
Stage 8	Post-module interviews: one interview with the instructor/lecturer after the teaching of the module
Stage 9	Transcribing and analysis of Interviews, focus groups, class observations
Stage 10	Collection of online discussion transcripts
Stage 11	Framework: Development of framework based on Henri (1992), MacKenzie and Murphy (2000), Gundawardena (1998)
Stage 12	Analysis: Thematic categorisation of student interactivity using the developed framework Conceptual grouping and analysis using Atlas Qualitative Software
Stage 13	Identification of student interactivity: Coding of messages over the life of the discussion group using the developed framework
Stage 14	Report: Development of recommendations and principles These principles will be used for subsequent developments

Stage 5: Pre-module interviews

This interview attempted to provide the researcher with some insight into the academics background with online learning and their current ideas about how they would teach online. The interview was often undertaken during the early part of the semester when the academic was still planning the module. This interview was either audio recorded or video recorded in the Centre for Integrating Technology in Education (CITIE) TV studio.

First Interview Questions for Academic Staff

1. Could you give some **background** on the module you are teaching?
 - Title of module?
 - Main focus?
 - Assessment?
 - Number of students, etc?
 - Number of times you have taught the module before?
2. What are some of the main **activities** you will you utilise in teaching the module?
3. **Why** are you teaching some of the module **online**?
4. What types of **activities** do you utilise in the **online** component of your module?
5. How do you **encourage** students to participate in online discussion?
6. What are some of your explicit strategies for **moderating** the online discussion in this module?
7. How do you encourage **deep processing of the content** by students in the online environment?
8. How do you encourage **reflective practice** when students are online?
9. What are your **initial perceptions** of teaching this module online?
10. How do the students react to learning online in this module?

Stage 8: Post-module Interviews

This interview attempted to provide the researcher with some insight into the academics perceptions of teaching in the online environment. The intention was for the academic to reflect on their teaching and suggest possible adaptations to the module if they taught it in a subsequent semester. The interview was undertaken at the end of the semester when the academic could reflect back to their teaching. This was either audio recorded or video recorded in the CITIE TV studio.

Second Interview Questions for Academic Staff

1. What are some of the main **activities** that you utilised in teaching the module?
2. What types of **activities** did you utilise in the online component of your module?
3. How did you **encourage** students to learn online or participate in online discussion?
4. What were some of the **advantages** in teaching online for this module?
5. What were some of the **disadvantages** in teaching online for this module?
6. How would you teach this module the **next time**?
7. How did your **students react** to learning online in this module?

Staff perceptions

The five staff members found online discussion forums to be a useful teaching and learning strategy. The modules provided a good cross section of different content areas, different teaching styles and one module was taught in Chinese.

Case study 1: Motor control and learning

The objective of this module was to examine the theoretical foundations of performances and learning of motor skills and how those apply to the teaching setting. The module examined the theory and the concepts and examined various ways to explain and understand motor performance and motor skill learning. When asked why she was teaching online she suggested that it was due to a personal interest.

This past year with a colleague I discovered online opportunities and possibilities to engage students in interaction and I was fascinated...and I saw an amazing opportunity for students to learn from one another.

Throughout the interview the lecturer emphasised students learning from each other and seeing other perspectives.

I saw an amazing opportunity for students to learn from one another, so the main purpose of this online part of the module [was] to get students to share their opinions; and interact; and learn from each other.

The reason why I think this is amazing is to encourage ... my students to learn better and comprehend issues; and learn from one another; and also learn to respect other people's point of view.

In addition she also wanted students to develop critical thinking skills to synthesise the content and debate and question other viewpoints in order to assist them to think more deeply about the content.

I want them to explain, to defend their position, to relate to ... readings or personal experiences so that is the beauty I think of this tool... they are able to not only make their statement clear and support it, but then to respond to a colleague or classmate and say, ...I do not agree with you because... we see them ... attempting to understand at a deeper level.

However there were some drawbacks to teaching part of the module online.

I must admit it's very time consuming, because this is the first time; I'm not sure about the best way to moderate and get the discussions going, I have a lot to learn.

Overall this lecturer emphasised students learning from each other and seeing different perspectives.

Case Study 2: Physical education for children with special needs

The objectives of this module were to teach the regular physical education teacher how to teach individuals with disabilities in the regular physical education setting. When asked why he was teaching online the lecturer commented that:

...it's an...innovative teaching strategy.

Throughout the interview the lecturer focussed on reflection and collaborative activities that were possible in the online environment.

We ... allow the student to ... observe other people's reflection ... not to criticise, just react to other people, [in] this way they can exchange their opinions, they can share... their comments and I think they can help each other...

In this module it was important for students to debate the issues as they were controversial topics in the school system. He also wanted them to see other opinions and reflect on their own practices.

Actually I posted questions, I guided them, I observed all ...discussion, and if I see a couple of very good comments, I would bring these comments out ... for other people's attention. I would [also] guide them a certain direction.

We actually asked them to post their reflections online ...and share it [with other students]. I think that's ... [a major] benefit ... to share their opinion...

You are getting them to reflect by looking at other perspectives of other students...

I think in the future, I am going to continue to do it this way... and try to involve [them] in more discussion ... not only [to] share their opinion [but] combine other's opinion, maybe to create another one ...or maybe create some other theme.

Student student interaction in the online environment appeared to be quite extensive in this module. The lecturer fostered student student interaction and optimised the online environment for this aspect.

I think I would like to say ...the student stands on other people's shoulders and ... can see much farther than just by themselves... so they actually use other people's opinion, other people's contribution and ...not only learn by themselves. I think this is the main advantage.

I think they learn not only from me as a teacher... they also [learn] from all the other classmates...

Student teacher interaction was also fostered as lecturers were able to provide additional feedback and obtain a more in-depth insight into student learning and thus improve their own teaching of the module. In particular this staff member emphasised reflection, the collaborative nature of learning and learning from other students as important characteristics of his approach in the online learning environment.

Case Study 3: Chinese grammar and logic in linguistics

The objective of this module was to provide students with overall pedagogical grammar, as the basic language knowledge for potential Chinese Teachers or teachers of Chinese and to equip students with the basic idea about grammatical sentences and ungrammatical sentences in standard Chinese. This was the lecturer's first experience with online learning.

In fact, before trying this e-learning platform, I used to contact ... students by email quite often, so it's not completely new for me to ...contact ... students electronically.

This is... a personal curiosity, because I can feel that things are developing very rapidly online, I don't want to be left behind and I never believe that teachers of Chinese should always teach as a traditional didactic teacher.

However it was unexpected how passive the students were initially.

This is very challenging.... I didn't expect them to be so passive because I have told them right at the beginning... because they have so many chances to use the computer, they should understand [Internet] explorer, the way of using the e-learning platform ... but in fact, it's not easy.

...some students are quite reluctant to change their habits, they still ... email [me] their feelings; their question, so I deliberately cut [out] one of the student's questions, and ... then paste it onto the discussion board. I didn't answer her question directly; I just gave her some hints and then posted my response on ... Blackboard.

As seen above changing teaching strategies would encourage students to break out of their old habits.

Another major feature was the extra feedback the lecturer obtained from the students.

I think it's very efficient, especially the course statistics part. It helps me to understand the participation, the involvement of students in the teaching and learning process because they can't hide. They can't hide from me.

I think it provided an... extended content opportunity for me because after every module I always have a feeling that I haven't finished what I want to say. I need further clarification ... sometimes I can spot some very good chance to further elaborate a certain concept ...but there wasn't enough time. I think it helps me to organise my thinking much better ...[and] provide advice or suggestions for students.

To be frank, my first priority is how the online facilities can facilitate them to learn better, so I am trying to convince them that this is very precious facility that we're using, we shouldn't waste it. And I want them to use it more effectively to ask me questions; to challenge my suggested answer for the exercise... I'm also marking the questions they set and so there is another way of providing feedback to students.

Well, very often I think it's very hard to keep telling students what they should do, so what I do is I show them what I do.

The ability to provide another form of feedback was considered important to this staff member.

We have a very good collection of teaching material and a very good record of the teaching process. I found this most useful because with some of the student feedback, I think I can revise my teaching materials better...at the beginning of the module I have asked students to provide some ... questions, small quizzes so I can also use these ideas, their ideas in designing future exercises for students.

There were however some surprises for the lecturer.

I asked individual students why they didn't make use of the forum to ask questions, to discuss. [To] my surprise, some of them find typing Chinese difficult and their Chinese computer literacy is not as good as I expected. So that makes [it] more difficult to make use of the online facilities in Chinese. I found this out at the [latter] stage of the module.

Case Study 4: Effective communication in english: reading and writing

One of the objectives of this module was to teach students to be critical consumers of writing and to examine the underlying message in writing. Students had to peer edit an advertisement in groups of three to four students. The lecturer provided a checklist to guide students to check items including tenses, coherency and punctuation, etc. Microsoft Word's track changes function was also utilised. When asked why she taught online she suggested that:

I like ... doing things in a different way and having ... a different focus that they get online... I like them to use discussion boards; that's a way to develop their language skill. If they get used to using them [discussion boards] in my class, I hope they might ...keep up their language skill [by using discussion boards outside the Institute].

She also suggested that providing feedback in this environment was a core part of her role.

I like ... to pick out points of interest [in the discussion forum] and ... challenge them to expand on [their work]...

She also suggested that peer reviewing for the students writing was useful in giving them an understanding of giving feedback and receiving feedback in relation to a writing task.

I think the whole process of going through someone's work ... could give them some idea of the value of the comments that are often written on their own work ...

In addition the concept of personal space demonstrated an important concept for students to think about reflecting on their work. The lecturer felt that this personal space in the online environment was beneficial for the students learning.

I think as far as reviewing [writing and reviewing online] ... it gives them a little bit of personal space...

Overall, this lecturer emphasised the student's ability to peer review writing assignments as a useful aspect of the online environment.

Case Study 5: Teaching and learning of selected topics in information technology

The objective of this module was to reflect on issues to do with integrating IT and teaching and learning with IT. It examined four key questions: What are the most effective ways for teachers to really integrate ICT in teaching and learning? What ICT skills and knowledge should a teacher really know? How should teachers design learning with ICT? and how should teachers approach some of the dilemmas and issues about using IT in Education?

This module specifically addressed the integration of the online learning environment and the complementation of face to face discussion and online discussion.

So the combination of linking general topics, specific examples or references with convergent questions challenge the students to make ... connections. This tends to promote much more focused ... effective ... responses, reflections or ... discussion. I think discussions are ... more open ended

I think they are enjoying having a class where I am challenging them to give their thoughts...

In particular the use of reflective activities was an important part of the module and was emphasised throughout the interviews.

I think the an advantage is the capacity for immediate reflection [and] ... longer term reflection ... The capacity for the students to... come up with a question straight away, or for homework, and there would be a convenient way ...to post questions and to be answered.

...everything we do [online] shows a record of the participation and the record of the learning process...

One of the principles that ... I formulated clearly in my mind [is] that the most effective learning involves some sort of an activity, reflection cycle or response.

As expected this lecturer emphasised the pedagogy as opposed to the technology and utilising online learning as part of the learning experience not instead of it.

I think the danger is trying to see this is as some sort of substitute for what you are doing in class rather than feeding into and overlapping [what you do] in class ...So there is ... a general propensity, for possible misuse [of online learning] ...

In particular this lecturer emphasised the use of reflective activities in the online environment

For me the two big advantages of teaching online,... lies in the use of web pages or use of web forms as repositories for the learning artefacts...I think the second related advantage is the capacity for ... reflection ...[by the student].

As can be seen from the above discussion the five academics are generally positive about the online learning environments. Each of the academics has focussed on a particular aspect of teaching and learning which they have emphasised in the online environment. *Multiple perspectives and students learning from each other* were emphasised in particular by two staff members. For example, within the online discussions students could share opinions, observe other reflections, respect other viewpoints and learn not to harshly criticise other opinions. Other staff focussed on using the OLE to assist with immediate and longer term *reflections*. Peer editing and peer reviewing were seen to be advantageous to another staff member who could observe this process and provide feedback when required. Another staff member focussed on using the OLE for extending contact with students. The lecturer provided *feedback* to students by elaborating concepts online, used the course statistics to monitor participation and obtained student feedback about the teaching materials which would be useful for future modules. The lecturers were able to adapt and utilise the online learning environment for their specific and unique content areas. The creativity of the individual lecturer was the most significant factor in teaching their module in the online environment.

Conclusion

This research project has provided some insight into what the lecturers intended to teach online and how it was going to be undertaken. In addition this study provided an examination of lecturer beliefs about teaching and learning. The staff who were involved in the research project would be considered pioneers or innovators at the Institute. They generally utilised student centred teaching approaches, emphasised feedback to students and were often passionate about their own teaching and learning. In general they were interested in exploring different approaches to teaching and learning and would be considered to be risk takers (i.e. experimented with different approaches) with their teaching and learning.

In general, staff reported that it often required a large amount of time to teach in the online environment. This is consistent with other studies (Myers, Bennett, Brown & Henderson 2004). This study also appears to support the notion that teacher use of OLEs may have more to do with professional learning by the lecturer than many other factors. In general staff perceived online learning environments to be useful for their teaching needs. This study suggests that faculty will adopt new technologies when they see that it will improve their teaching. In addition although staff viewed OLEs as needing significant amounts of extra time and preparation they choose to “spend extra time and use OLEs to increase opportunities to grow professionally” (p. 84). This attitude to the online learning environment was indicative of the staff who participated in the research study. When lecturers articulate their vision as allowing the student to “stand on other shoulders and see much farther than just by themselves”, our students are in good hands.

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