Chapter V

A Great Wall of Difference:
Musings on Instructional Design in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Instructional design is typically viewed as a process for identifying and solving instructional problems. However, for designers who work on international development projects, the "western" assumptions of instructional design may pose particular challenges as project participants work together to find solutions to teaching and learning problems. The challenge is to find culturally sensitive ways to create resources and provide training for individuals who have different cultural backgrounds. After almost three years of work on the project shared in this article, there are still a number of questions. For example, why has there not been the development of a community of practice around instructional design with the project members? In addition, why has the Canadian project team been unable to encourage our Chinese colleagues to value the instructional design process? This paper offers a number of musings and insights about the field of instructional design within the Chinese context.

Introduction

Instructional design (ID), as a field of study and a growing profession, is typically viewed as a "…process for examining human performance problems and identifying solutions" (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2001, p. 5). However, for designers who work on international development projects, the "western" assumptions of instructional design may pose particular challenges as project participants work together to find solutions to teaching and learning problems. The challenge is to find culturally sensitive ways to create resources and provide training for individuals who have different cultural backgrounds. A further complexity occurs when the project also attempts to build the capacity of novice instructional designers. In 2003, I became involved in a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) project, which aims to reduce poverty in Western China through enhanced teacher training systems using distance education. It is a five-year, $12 million project conducted in partnership with the Chinese government. Within the project, Canada provides expertise in student-centred instruction (SCI) and distance delivery and China provides context expertise and an understanding of the reform curriculum. Distance delivery is critical because of the number of teachers requiring training and the large geographic area of Western China. Distance delivery necessitates thoughtful design and production of resources and this project also focussed on the design, implementation and long-term sustainability of a teacher education system that relies on learning support centres.

After almost three years of work there are a number of questions in relation to the project. For example, why has there not been the development of a community of practice around instructional design with the project members? In addition, why has the Canadian project team been unable to encourage our Chinese colleagues to see the value of the instructional design process? This paper reports on this international project and attempts to raise questions that might be of value to other groups considering international partnerships. This chapter offers some musings and speculations about the field of instructional design within the Chinese context. The Chinese project partners in this project include professionals drawn from the National Centre of Educational Technology (NCET) and their counterparts (PCETS) in each of the project's three provinces (Sichuan, Ningxia, and Xinjiang). On the Canadian side, consultants from the Athabasca University, University of Calgary, University of Alberta, and Alberta Education participated in the project. In addition, Agriteam Canada provided the project management.

Background

As early as 1960, China implemented a distance education system through the development of an educational broadcasting network to promote continuing education and lifelong learning. China became the first country to design and implement a strategy for the use of radio and television to provide higher education and professional development opportunities (Yuhui, 1988). Since the early 1980s, China has expanded universal basic education (learning opportunities for all children—rural and urban—in grades 1-9) across the country by using *minban*, community-paid teachers who have limited amounts of formal education

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