

Chapter 10

Teaching Students in Mainland China: Factors for Consideration with Online Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study examines the design, implementation and cultural challenges of delivering an online university course to a group of 21 Mainland Chinese educators. Culturally influenced challenges included: culturally different learning styles, inhibited online communication, and language issues. A mid-course survey and an end of the semester course evaluation tool provided anecdotal data to facilitate enacting solutions for the challenges presented in the design and delivery of the course.

SITUATION BACKGROUND

The course, *Concepts and Issues in Education*, was delivered by a large Mid-Atlantic University (hence referred to as “University”) to a cohort of 21 graduate students in Mainland China. The focus of the course was contemporary issues in American K-12 education. All of the students

were employed at the time of the class as K-12 teachers in China and were enrolled in a cohort program with the intent of earning a Master of Arts Degree in Education (MAT). The majority of the students in the cohort were English teachers (i.e. teaching English to K-12 Chinese students). English teachers in China must earn a Bachelors Degree in English and pass a standardized national English language test (Chen, Bennett, and Maton, 2008). Given this requirement, the students were

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expected to enter the class with English language skills consistent with those of other graduate students attending the University.

SETTING THE STAGE

University Technical Infrastructure and Support

The University from which the course emanated mainly delivers courses in traditional face-to-face instructional environments. Some courses are delivered in a hybrid environment (defined by the University as some portion of a course is taught online instead of face-to-face), and a smaller portion of coursework is delivered 100% online. Although the University offers fully online courses and is in support of the design and implementation of more fully online courses, the University struggles to provide the technical infrastructure and resources needed to support these courses. The most significant issue was the lack of 24 hour phone support for the online learning environment, Blackboard Academic Suite (Blackboard, 2010). Blackboard inquiries and help requests were handled via e-mail requests to a staff of two full-time support specialists who work a traditional 9:00am to 5:00 pm workday. Most of the e-mail help requests were handled within 24 hours; although this is sufficient for campus-based courses, it is often not helpful for a student who needs immediate support, especially if they are a world away. Courses delivered in Asia are on a twelve hour time differential from the University. As the students in China were seeking support, the full time Blackboard administrators were not available. Students expressed frustration in not getting immediate support by either e-mail or phone. This disconnect led to a pattern of delayed e-mail correspondence between the Chinese students and the Blackboard help desk.

Organization

An organizational hierarchy was in place for the cohort program. A coordinator for the program was housed on the University campus. A liaison based in Mainland China was in place to resolve issues with the students in China. Both the program coordinator and the liaison were natives of Mainland China. This facilitated improved communication as both were fluent in Mandarin, the language dialect used by students in the cohort. The coordinator had taught previous cohorts of Chinese students and was able to share some general issues related to culture and learning with previous cohort students. This cohort had previously completed, in the summer 2008, two face-to-face courses in China, delivered by University instructor.

This was the first online course for the aforementioned China cohort and was designed in the summer of 2008 by two doctoral students under the direction of a University faculty member. The online version of the course was taught for the first time in the fall of 2008. All three individuals involved in the design process were associated with a University-based Instructional Technology doctoral program and had experience in instructional design strategies and online learning, although none had ever taught this course to students in China either online or face-to-face.

The course was designed using an online module approach. The core content was based on a University approved traditional face-to-face version of the course. Twelve online learning modules based on this core content were designed to accommodate a 12 week semester. Each module was initially designed to occur on a weekly basis (running from Monday to Sunday). Students were assigned readings and a variety of activities, including significant asynchronous online discussion and school-based problem solving scenario activities revolving around case studies. The primary academic content was covered Monday to Friday in each module. Saturdays and/or Sundays

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