

Intercultural e-learning: Reflections on Developing a Collaborative Approach to Pedagogy and Educational Technology in a Sino–UK Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the processes of ‘intercultural’ collaboration in the development of eLearning materials for the *eChina~UK* programme

Keywords

Intercultural pedagogy, collaboration, *eChina~UK*, Learning

INTRODUCTION

Working on complex educational projects requires collaboration (Ngor, 2001) (De Laat *et al.*, 2005; McConnell, 2006). The processes of collaboration are key to the success of such projects (Burnard *et al.*, 1999). However, good collaboration rarely happens by accident. This paper focuses on the processes of ‘intercultural’ collaboration in the development of an e-learning module for Phase One of the *eChina~UK* programme (Banks *et al.*, 2004; *eChina~UK* 2006).

Phase One of the *eChina~UK* programme (which was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England –HEFCE, there is also a Phase Two of the programme, currently underway) involved several projects in which members of UK universities collaborated with colleagues from various universities in China in the production of higher education Masters level course materials. The focus of the project discussed in this paper was the production of a Masters level Module in “Educational Technology and E-Learning” which was to be delivered to school teachers in China. However the overall HEFCE project had another objective, and that was the development of understandings of cultural change, and exchange, in e-learning pedagogy in both countries. Members of the various Sino-UK project teams participating in the programme (there were four projects) had different views on the importance of this objective, and indeed the Chinese partners also had different views on the importance to them of this objective.

The members of the UK team involved in the project discussed in this paper took this second objective extremely seriously. In fact, it would be correct to say that they considered this aspect of the project to be at least as important (if indeed not more important) than the joint production of any course materials. Working across cultural boundaries, with the additional complexities of language, presented us with real challenges in Phase 1 of the *eChina~UK* project. In this paper we explore what it means for UK and Chinese academics to become genuinely collaborative as they bring together their practical and conceptual understandings of e-learning. Using vignettes of reflection by team members, we look in depth at the collaborative processes in which we engaged as we shared our understandings of key ideas (in order to undertake a joint project - the development of the Educational Technology course). Using commentaries from key collaborators, we focus on the communication strategies used, and how the quality of the shared project improved as the underlying collaborative processes developed and improved.

The emerging theme of this paper, that we illustrate and develop with previously unpublished data from phase 1 of the *eChina~UK* project, is that an ‘Intercultural’ approach, incorporating pedagogy, collaborative action and theory, provides real support for Sino-UK e-learning initiatives. The paper concludes with an outline of how we are using these ideas to enhance future ‘Intercultural’ academic collaborations in the Sino-UK context. We will also outline a possible research agenda for this work.

METHODS

The data for this paper was assembled by three members of the University of Sheffield-Beijing Normal University (UoS-BNU) teams. The three of us have reflected from different perspectives on our experience of participating in the project. The two UK participants, (referred to below as (1) and (2)), were involved directly in the pedagogic work relating to the module “Educational Technology and eLearning”. They investigated the needs of the potential learner groups, set the pedagogic goals and developed a structure to create learning units in the module. Both reflected intensively on the process of intercultural collaboration from the pedagogic viewpoint. The third participant (referred to as (3) below) was part of the Chinese team and was the project manager, whose duties included, coordinating and managing the collaborative work on the Chinese side for the project as a whole, participating sometimes in academic discussions as the Chinese-English interpreter when necessary, organizing pilot implementations in China of the jointly produced course units, and playing the role of e-tutor for the module “Educational Technology and e-learning” during the pilots. Thus, he experienced the Sino-UK collaboration at management level while the course was under construction, then participated directly in the online learning and teaching process during the pilots.

The research process involved a face-to-face meeting to develop some key themes, based upon a short shared reflection of our experiences of Phase 1 of the UoS-BNU *eChina-UK* Project. These six key themes were then used by each of us separately to create a (independent) personal account of the project, around the shared key themes. Finally, we worked together to combine and summarize our individual responses to produce the collaborative summaries presented in the next section. Quotes are drawn from summaries of individual audio recordings by the three team members. These summaries are phenomenographic: they represent the personal experiences of our team members around the key themes.

The themes forming the basis of our reflections were:

1. What did you expect at the beginning from participation in project?
2. How did you experience working with UK/Chinese partners?
3. Have you changed your impressions/understanding of the UK/Chinese culture as a result of participation?
4. What do you think of quality of final product? How did the collaborative process take place?
5. How do you perceive differences between UK and Chinese partners in terms of thinking and planning styles in course production? How do you perceive differences between UK and Chinese partners in terms of team meetings?
6. Are there other external influencing factors on these processes?

In the following, figures in brackets refer to each member of the team: (1) and (2) refer to the two UK members; (3) refers to the Chinese member. Our intention is to present the variation in the views held by the three members.

FINDINGS

Initial expectations of participation in the project

A sense of ‘open-mindedness’ was reported as an initial feeling about working together. However, different perspectives were held. There was some uncertainty about the project, which focused mainly on the “difficulties of communicating in the English language” (1) (2), and around “the huge difficulties in our (UK and Chinese) cultural perspectives about teaching and learning” (1). Both sides had a wish to understand the different cultures of team members and to understand the processes of e-learning in each context. The possibility of an ‘intercultural’ experience was anticipated. There were many hopes that the two teams would be able to work together and that the national distance learning infrastructure might be enhanced in China (3), that the project might form the basis for future work, and that it would result in the production of good quality e-learning courses.

Additionally, member (3) had a concern to relate the project to institutional aims, such as the improvement of staff development and the creation of online courses. The UK members perceived that “the pressures to produce a product are much stronger among our Chinese colleagues, products that can be used with students”, whereas the UK team was more “concerned to develop a dialogue around a course design that was built on student

collaborative learning and collaborative work”(2). This difference in goal-orientation can be explained by the perceived external influencing factors, mentioned below.

Experiences of working with Chinese/UK partners

All three perceived the intercultural collaboration as an “enjoyable” (1) and an “inspiring” (3) process; it was “a nice experience” (2). It was reported that the intercultural collaboration was “tremendously rewarding, and it gives an opportunity for us to get insights into both the Chinese culture and also the Chinese ways of thinking about learning and teaching in higher education” (1). The collaborative team-work was, however, “quite difficult and sometimes frustrating”(1), since a lot of time had to be spent on understanding each other. In the initial stages of the project the face-to-face meetings and discussions left members “physically very tired”, even “exhausted ” (2).

The practical reality of working across two continents was challenging. Initial positive orientations were tempered by the difficulties and complexities of two teams of people working between two contexts and cultures. This had effects on the management and outputs of the project. Use of English language by Chinese colleagues was very impressive, and Chinese colleagues were keen to use their English skills.

Changing impressions and understandings of the UK/Chinese culture as a result of participation

Though they expressed initial expectations in different ways, all three perceived progress made during the project in gaining a better understanding of each other’s culture. Before participating in the project, one UK member said he had a “very superficial impression” of China as a “very closed society”, that is “highly regulated”. During the project he became aware that Chinese team members were sometimes “uncertain about expressing what they were able or not able to do”. He tried to get a deeper understanding of this by exploring various issues through face-to-face discussions with Chinese colleagues e.g. around such questions as “why innovative approaches like group work and formative evaluation, were perceived by Chinese HE staff as not acceptable.” He found that this was perhaps due to the Chinese members being “bound by traditions, formalities and regulations about assessment either within their own institution or with respect to the (Chinese) government’s perspective” (1). The second UK member reported that it took nearly a year for “the formality in meetings to be broken down and informal discussion taking place in small groups”. He perceived that “it is a long time to get to the point [‘being open to each other’, ‘building some trust between each other’]” and “that is the starting point for a collaboration, but not the end of it”. The language problem did have the effect of slowing down the process of mutual trust and group development. It became clear that there was often not a high level of shared understanding arising from discussions. When agreements were made, they were often only superficial, and this sometimes only became apparent only months later. This may have been due to cultural differences, differences in learning and teaching practices as well as language. The three factors may have been interacting.

But perhaps more importantly, both sides had “different agendas”, which weren’t acknowledged publicly because there was a lack of “informal communication” (2). The Chinese member (3) realized during the project work that “the understanding of e-learning in UK differs from university to university” and “maybe the personal epistemological belief is a more decisive factor for e-learning course development”, and the “revolutionary change in education caused by ICT doesn’t lie in how the learning materials are created or delivered, but rather in how the concrete learning activity is organized and who has the final decision on how to organize it”. Innovation, then, seemed possible, but over time we realized that a complex of cultural, linguistic, institutional, and practice (CLIP) factors came together to mediate this process. This had the effect of slowing the process, preventing implementation, and highlighting the need to develop a pragmatic spirit of compromise in order to maintain collaboration.

Generally, communications via the internet and video conferences between face-to-face meetings were not effective. This led to difficulties in maintaining the collaborative effort, and led to some divergence in product development, separate products, and the loss of the sense that we were developing ideas and products through a shared process. This emerged as a central, ongoing dilemma of the work.

Quality of final product and the role of collaboration in the process

The product was to be an online module with both content and explicit collaborative processes embedded in it. There were several very ‘positive’ face-to-face discussions, where a range of ideas and views were raised. However, this was ‘hampered’ by difficult communications, and led to a ‘collaborative’ production process that was less than clear. The process became ‘driven’ by a desire to create a ‘product’, on the Chinese side, and this

diverged from a desire to focus on practice, research and process on the UK side. There was an inevitable compromise arising from the CLIP complex of factors mentioned above. In the UK team there was a focus on educational beliefs, values and learning processes. The Chinese focus was largely on content and the details of structure.

The three members emphasized different aspects of the collaborative process. The UK members intensively explored the process of developing the online learning module collaboratively with their China partners, with an emphasis on developing joint (Sino-UK) understandings of online learning and teaching. The China member focused on explaining how the modules were accepted by the learners and the external evaluators. The difference of viewpoints led also to different judgments on the collaboration. The China member cited from the external evaluation report (produced by a team at Bristol and Southampton Universities) that “the collaboration worked and the aims and objectives of the project were achieved”. However, for one UK member (1), “probably it (the module) would not satisfy either side”, because it was the product of “compromise between two different views of the teaching and learning process”, he believes “the most important outcome is ...the student learning process”. He said that the collaborative production of the module “is very difficult”, “it was a very frustrating process, I don’t think that we have fully achieved what we wanted to...”, while the other UK member (2) stated “collaboration between people is a complex process”, even more so in an intercultural context.

In terms of the concrete collaborative process, one UK member (1) perceived that “collaboration took place mainly at the level of structure planning, then each side developed the units based on what they understood e-learning to be”, The other UK member (2) talked about the “difficulties in communication”, which were caused by the mutual lack of competence in communicating in a foreign language and the “formality in discussions”. He said that “it took two years to come through” such barriers.

One reason for such differences could be that both UK team members and the Chinese were involved in the collaboration from different aspects and at different stages. A second reason could be their difference in initial expectations, already mentioned above.

Thinking and planning styles in course production and team meetings: differences between UK and Chinese partners

All members thought that the project itself was a learning process. It “improved our understanding of collaborative course development (1) (2). However, the UK team felt their underpinning educational philosophy is still quite different to that of the Chinese team.

In terms of the online learning course design, Chinese and UK colleagues share the view that the Chinese team was concerned about ‘content’ while the UK team focused more on learning processes (Goodyear *et al.*, 2005). The China member analyzed the course units produced by the UK team, and those produced by the China team, from three dimensions namely, course structure: content-focused versus process-oriented; learning activity: teacher-centred versus student-centred; and assessment: external assessment by teacher versus assessment by students, and stated that the Chinese units tended to the former and UK units to the latter. One UK member (1) pointed out that in the UK “a bottom-up approach” was adopted to create the course units “that involves participants in making decisions about their own learning” and ensuring that they “work together collaboratively in the units”. “They can make a choice about what they want to learn, and to some degree about how they want to learn”, while he perceived that Chinese colleagues adopted “a top-down approach” where experts “produce learning materials around aims and objectives, the students learn what the teacher requires them to learn, and they assess their learning results according to the objectives set by the teacher”. In China, teacher interaction with individual students is viewed as most significant. In the UK, the interaction between students is viewed as important. Teacher participation in students’ tasks is not used in China. These differences are reflected in the different styles of the UK units and the Chinese units in the module that was jointly developed. Instructional systems design was a dominant feature of Chinese thinking. In the UK a research-informed, student centred approach that emphasized reflection and had less structure was the basis of thinking.

In relation to team meetings, all three mentioned different dimensions. One UK member (1) focused more on the different interpersonal relationships during meetings between the UK and Chinese teams. He perceived that “there was a high degree of hierarchy among members of their (Chinese) teams”, only the leading person was able to make decisions and others carried them out. However, “in a meeting in the UK, each member would have more or less the same status”; “We try and come to a decision through consensus”. The other UK member mentioned the process where both sides came closer, from a formal relationship to a somewhat informal one, to open discussions. As he said “It took a year before a dialogue took place about pedagogy, about process of teaching and learning”; “The face-to-face meeting was the opportunity for communication. The videoconference didn’t help so much”. The Chinese member, however, emphasized the influence of different thinking

preferences on meeting discussions, namely, the Chinese would focus on what to do, while UK people would be concerned more with the process i.e. the when and how to do. He suggested that it might have been better to let team members express all of what they had in mind before exploring the related factors in order to avoid unpleasant arguments. Both the UK and China members agreed that “we need to acknowledge each others’ styles in planning”.

External influencing factors on these processes

There were many external factors and sources of pressure that influenced the way that members of the UK and China teams worked and went about producing the module units. These were essentially different stakeholder expectations.

“On the UK side the pressure does not come from the University, it comes from the founding body (HEFCE)” (2). UK colleagues have also realized that Chinese institutions emphasize usable products rather than an exploration of collaborative understandings of e-learning: these are factors that have “strongly driven” (2) the Chinese participants in the project. On the Chinese side (3) the external factors influencing project management included aspects such as “policy at national and university level”, “expectations of stakeholders in the broadest sense”, “leadership style and organizational culture”.

DISCUSSION

The collaborative production of the module in “Educational Technology and E-Learning” was a complex process. But it was one in which we learned a great deal about our different cultural conceptions of e-learning. It can be seen from the above presentation of our reflections that a major theme running through our shared experience was “difference” and the need to support difference when working in an intercultural setting such as this. We feel this is an important issue to raise here as our experiences tell us that an intercultural approach to the production of course materials that reflects differences in pedagogy, collaborative action and theory provides the necessary and real support for Sino-UK initiatives of this kind.

The work of collaborating in Phase One of the *eChina~UK* programme forced us to consider our differing conceptions of e-learning: the different beliefs and values that both the UK and China team members held about the process of producing a course on e-learning that was to be delivered by e-learning. We made some progress in understanding these conceptions in the collaborative production of the course on Educational Technology and E-Learning. But we feel there is still much more to understand. For example, what is the range of conceptions of e-learning held by HE teachers in the UK and in China? Do the conceptions held by teachers in each country differ, and if so in what ways and why? How do conceptions of e-learning impinge on course design? Are teachers in each country ‘able’ to underpin their courses with the values and beliefs they hold about teaching and learning? Are there any intervening factors that make this difficult for them, and if so what are they?

All of this suggests to us that an exploration of ‘conceptions of e-learning’ among higher education teachers in the UK and China, such as those involved in Phase One, would be an interesting and fruitful way of developing this project in Phase Two of the *eChina~UK* programme.

***eChina~UK* Phase Two**

From our work to date in Phase One of the *eChina~UK* Project it has become apparent to us that we have to develop a shared (that is, ‘intercultural’) understanding of pedagogy (teaching, learning, e-tutoring etc) if we are to be successful in collaboratively developing e-learning materials and in generating successful professional educational development in e-learning. Although ‘intercultural’ in this context primarily refers to the ‘large’ Chinese-British cultures, it can also refer to ‘smaller’ cultures that exist in both countries.

This is a complex process in which our ideas and understandings of terminologies, issues and practices have to be constantly revisited and renegotiated, and in which new understandings emerge as we proceed. We have started to understand this process, but much remains to be done. We call this “Intercultural Professional Development”, and an in-depth, critical examination of it is the focus of our combined work in Phase 2 of the Project. The results of this new project will be of direct benefit to both UK and Chinese HE systems by making use of the synergy of ideas and resources available in joint project developments. In Phase Two, we have agreed to carry out research aimed at developing our understanding of intercultural e-learning pedagogy as the core of the project work.

The shared intercultural understandings are being examined in two ways:

Firstly, and most importantly, by the joint Sino-UK development of an online course in intercultural e-learning pedagogy designed to allow UK and Chinese HE staff to explore differences and similarities in their understanding of e-learning pedagogy and to collaboratively develop new shared knowledge about teaching, learning and tutoring in e-learning contexts (Ho *et al.*, 2001). The content of this course is to include learning material designed specifically to facilitate collaborative intercultural exchanges which will illuminate different conceptions of e-learning. We also plan to develop and evaluate new pedagogic methods and tools to support formative assessment (knowledge extraction and analysis).

Secondly, intercultural understandings are being examined by comparative research into UK and Chinese higher education teachers' conceptions of e-learning (Kember, 2001). We have developed a methodology for doing this based on existing research into teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning. There are two important elements to this work:

The first is the area of research interest, which is "conceptions of e-learning and teaching". Considerable research has been carried out into conceptions of learning and teaching, the findings of which have been used to help university teachers and professional developers understand the ways in which teachers approach the development of their teaching, and how they understand student learning. As far as we are aware at the moment, no similar research has been carried out into higher education teachers' conceptions of **e-learning and teaching**, which is the focus of this new study. It may also be the case that no comparative research into Sino-UK higher education teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching generally exists either, although Gao and Watkins (2002) and Alexander et al (1998) have carried out comparative studies looking at conceptions of learning and teaching held by school teachers in China and Singapore with those held by teachers in the United States.

The second important element is the methodological approach that we are using in carrying out this research. We have adopted a phenomenographic approach (Marton & Saljo, 1997) which aims to focus on identifying and describing the qualitatively different ways in which people understand phenomena in the world around them. Phenomenography suggests that we are guided in our actions by the interpretations we construct about particular phenomena. It is likely that the improvement of complex phenomena such as e-teaching and e-learning will require an understanding of the interpretive nature of this relationship.

In this second Phase of the *eChina~UK* project, we are building on the successful relations of UK colleagues and those at Beijing Normal University that were developed in Phase One. We are, in addition, bringing three other Chinese universities to the project each of whom will bring a distinctive and knowledgeable contribution to the proposed work, and who will be able to incorporate the findings into their university policies and practices. The work that we are carrying out is of direct and immediate relevance to all those involved in the Chinese higher education e-learning sector. We are also fortunate to have access to the Asia E-Learning Network to disseminate the findings of the project over the next two years and beyond. The work of the project is likely therefore to have a major and significant impact on e-learning in China and Asia, as well as in the UK.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have attempted to provide some vignettes of the experiences of three members of the UoS-BNU *eChina~UK* team, using a phenomenographic approach to compare and discuss these accounts. Based upon this analysis we offer some tentative conclusions that may be of assistance to others in the early stages of such work:

1. Mutual trust is the basis for successful communication; however, trust itself is based on shared aims, or at least mutually supportive aims for the project. To build trust requires the participants being interested in the participating cultures.
2. Critical reflection on beliefs and practices of teaching and learning is a necessary requirement to maintain and develop intercultural collaboration.
3. Intercultural interaction fosters social construction of teaching and learning in ICT contexts. This helps to critique habitual practices and 'taken for granted' perceptions, as well as to enrich expectations and knowledge about project implementation.
4. Differences between national cultures and institutional cultures should be taken into consideration. Both are important in contributing to the success of research-driven collaborations.
5. Research into eLearning and research into intercultural collaboration in educational contexts are both of value in terms of the *eChina~UK* project.

6. Phenomenography is a valuable research method in this endeavour.

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