The eEducator Module: A New Approach to the Training of Online Tutors

Gordon Joyes (Gordon.Joyes@nottingham.ac.uk), University of Nottingham, UK
Carol Hall (Carol.Hall@nottingham.ac.uk), University of Nottingham, UK
Siew Ming Thang (tsm_2001uk@yahoo.co.uk), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

This article has been anonymously peer-reviewed and accepted for publication in the *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, an international, peer-reviewed journal that focuses on issues and trends in pedagogies and learning in national and international contexts. ISSN 1833-4105.

Abstract

The School of Education, University of Nottingham (UoN), UK and Beiwai Online, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) Beijing, China have been engaged on a collaborative research project to develop a generic module for the training of online tutors globally as part of the eChina-UK programme with funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England. This has led to a learner centred approach to the training that takes analysis of transitions within the learning and teaching process as a key focus. It provides trainee tutors with a range of online reflective analytic tools to support their developing understanding of effective practice in order to consider appropriate support for these transitions. This article describes the rationale behind the design of the various components and activities of the tutor training module including aspects of the development process and the research pilot into localisation at the Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Background

The School of Education, University of Nottingham (UoN), UK and Beiwai Online, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) Beijing, China have been engaged on a collaborative research project to develop online materials to support teachers of English in China at tertiary level and a Master of Arts (MA) in English language teaching (ELT). Details of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded developments and the wider eChina-UK programme of which this project was only one part can be found at http://www.echinauk.org/. As part of the UoN-BFSU collaboration and as a result of a user needs analysis of potential tutors for the Masters course it became clear that a 'new' approach to tutor training was needed. This resulted in further collaboration by the partners to develop a generic module for the training of online tutors as part of the eChina-UK programme, funded by the institution themselves and HEFCE.

The Need for a New Approach to Tutor Training

The approach to tutor training that exists in China tends to focus on supporting specific learning and teaching activities in the course. This tutor training programme

like many in China involves face-to-face residential training in orienting the tutor to the nature of the course and their role. At Beiwai Online there is also an online experiential component to the training which involves an exploration of the materials including an experience of using a discussion forum. There are two problems with this approach: firstly the training is course specific presenting models of effective practice that may not necessarily be transferable to other contexts; and secondly it does not support tutors in developing the skills necessary to be flexible enough to meet the changing demands of online tutoring. These increasing demands are as a result of the move to more complex advanced learning environments which include new tools and new ways of working - often the expectation is that the online learners work autonomously and collaboratively.

It does appear that it is common globally to expect tutors who are recruited to teach face to face to move over to some form of online learning and even to conduct wholly online courses without appropriate training. Recent studies of online learning in universities in the Commonwealth, Europe and North America have found that only a minority of respondents felt that academic staff were prepared adequately to teach online (Becker & Jokivirta, 2007; Katz, 2006). It appears that either staff are not participating in the training or it is ineffective, for example research in China revealed that it was rare to offer an experience of online learning as part of the training of tutors even though online tutors had not actually experienced online learning themselves (Wang, 2004). The challenge is clear: "It would appear as though the vast majority of … institutions have a challenging staff development and faculty training task ahead of them" (Becker & Jokivirta, 2007, p. 13).

In response to this need the eEducator project set out to develop an appropriate pedagogic approach that would be suitable for the training of online tutors anywhere in the world teaching on any course. The pedagogic approach within existing tutor training for online tutors can tend to be either course specific such as the Faculty Training Programme offered by U21 Global or be built on a phase or stage model (Lewis & Allan, 2005; Moule, 2007; Salmon, 2000) in which it is assumed that all the learners need to progress through stages for effective learning to occur - neither of these approaches are applicable as a generic framework. The pedagogic approach within training courses also tends to focus on the discussion group as the main tool for learning online and for understanding how to support effective group working - this seems to assume that a social constructivist pedagogy (Vygotsky, 1978) predominates online learning and in reality a wide range of pedagogic approaches can be utilised (HEFCE, 2004). There appears to be an assumption in training courses that all tutors need the same support, that all subject areas use the same pedagogic approach and that providing guidelines or rubrics is sufficient. The pedagogic approach needs to be aligned to the Third generation of distance learning which is characterised by being more learner centred and personalised in ways that provide for choice, creativity and the generation of new knowledge. These increasing demands have been facilitated by greater computing power and the move to server based and Web 2.0 approaches resulting in more complex learning environments which include new tools as well as new ways of working.

It is helpful to conceptualise learners as moving through transitions in their learning, i.e. from face to online, from communicating using speech, body language, text etc to a mainly text based format, from using a few digital tools to partly support learning to

using a wide variety of digital tools as the means to learn, from being dependent on their tutor to working in more self directed ways. Tutor training therefore needed to support tutors in understanding these transitions and how to support learners through them, it needed to provide them with the confidence and competence through reflection on experience and practice (Schön, 1983, 1987, 1991) to make effective decisions about the nature of support their learners needed. If the module was to be of use it needed to provide tutors with a range of online experiences that modelled the transitions their learners faced as an impetus for the tutors to reflect upon and develop the skills necessary to enquire into their practice.

Luarillard (2007) makes a distinction between those who can simply "process" information and those who can glimpse opportunities and create new methods to sort out problems. What is increasingly valued globally are learners who cannot only search and evaluate information but can work with others to generate new knowledge, and can provide their own local contextualisation and experience to solve problems. This perspective has influenced the design of the eEducator module in which tutors experience this enquiry-based approach to learning and develop the capacity to support learners to work in the same way.

The following key research question related to the appropriateness of the generic design was central to the project. Would the pedagogic approach adopted be suited to those working in different subject areas, from different ethnic backgrounds in a different country to where the module had been designed? The remainder of this paper considers the pedagogic design, highlights some key aspects and then explores preliminary findings from the research into localisation, i.e., the use of the eEducator module at USM.

The Design Process

The eEducator project used a participatory design (PD) approach that involved academics, learning technologists and potential users - experienced BeiWai online tutors who would eventually be supporting learners using advanced online materials. This idea of involving different stakeholders in curriculum development serves the purpose of enabling the users of a curriculum to take responsibility for their own learning experience, through participating in the design. Axup (2006) points out that PD has a very strong advantage: "Co-designing with real users in realistic situations and environments helps improve the quality of feedback users provide. Frequent iteration between users and designers reduces misconceptions designers make (in part due to insufficient domain experience)".

Understanding users' needs, their preference, their problems and confusions can only be achieved by frequent and profound communication between designers and users. There is a need "for designers to take work practice seriously—to see the current ways that work is done as an evolved solution to a complex work situation that the designer only partially understands" (Greenbaum & Kyng, 1991, p. 4).

Users' work experiences should have an important role to play in the design and should be highly valued. Learning designers need to listen to the users' voice and not just take for granted what users may like and have to know. This process is not

without its problems. For example, how can tutors untrained as designers take on this new role, how can the power relationships that exist between academics, tutors and learning designers be managed, how can the three cultures learn to speak a common pedagogic and technical language? This was the focus of longitudinal research in the project and is to be reported elsewhere. The following provides an outline of the PD process used in the project.

Ten Chinese tutors who were representative of the potential tutors for the online MA ELT volunteered to participate in the design of an etutor training module. These tutors all had an MA degree and were from a representative number of regions/cities. They had between 2-4 years' online tutoring experience. At the start of the design process a questionnaire and interview were conducted with these tutors by the project's Chinese research associate. The aim was to identify the tutor's perspective of key skills for online tutoring, these were:

- Computer literacy: an online tutor needs high levels of skill in using a computer and the internet.
- Communication: an online tutor needs to be an effective communicator with their online learners and to encourage effective communication between learners as well.
- Interpersonal relationships: an online tutor needs to know how to build effective interpersonal relationship and trust. This was a major concern for these tutors.
- Supporting new ways of working: an online tutor needs to support the learner in new ways of working, for example learner centred approaches mean learners need to learn how to develop a more autonomous approach to their learning
- Motivating learners: online tutors need to understand how to motivate learners to complete the work. Some of them feel because online learning requires learners to be more autonomous, tutors need motivation skills to motivate learners better because isolated learners can easily give up or fail to complete the tasks.
- Overcoming learner isolation: this can be a key reason for low retention on online courses and tutors need to understand how to overcome this.
- Professional development: there was a felt need for some direct involvement in researching practice and for some training in this.

This influenced the initial pedagogic framework for the module and Induction and Orientation units were created in the open source online learning environment Moodle and these were studied by the project tutors as a means of exposing them to advanced online learning using a range of online tools. The online learning experience was expected to help the project tutors reflect on the roles and needs of the learner and tutor in some detail to help them to think critically and creatively about the nature of the training materials that would be needed. These project tutors then worked collaboratively with Chinese and UK academics and learning designers and technicians in five small groups. This process began with a four day face to face meeting in Beijing where the project team began to develop an understanding of the task and of each other. By the end of the workshop rapid prototypes of online materials were developed and shared and plans for future working agreed. This was followed by a four month period of online working in which materials were developed and put online for piloting. A second face to face workshop in Beijing followed by a

further period of online working led to more development and the pilot module. The project team delivered a symposium at the 5th International Conference on ELT in China in May 2007 to mark the completion of the collaborative work. Research into the ways the materials could be adapted for use in another context was piloted at the School of Distance Education at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang in the year 2007 and this is discussed later in the article.

The Curriculum & Pedagogy

The pedagogic design underpinning the educator training module can be characterised as using an experiential and enquiry based approach that supports tutors in managing transitions in learning and supports them in setting goals for future enquiry into practice. The module is designed to last for between 10 and 12 weeks and is a mixture of self study and online group work - a screen shot of the module home page is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The eEducator module home page

The structure of the module is described below and is presented in the open source learning environment Moodle.

Unit 1 Introduction (1 week)

In this unit, tutors have the opportunity to get to know each other and to reflect on their current practice by considering eLearning pedagogy. They are also introduced to the module structure.

Unit 2 Experiential learning (3 weeks)

This unit contains eLearning content from the modules on which the tutors would be acting as tutors in the future. In this instance, materials and examples from the MA ELT module were used. Tutors act as learners in this unit and reflect on the kind of support they need from their tutors and establish a better understanding of the tutor's role.

Unit 3 Personal development planning (1 week)

This is a reflective unit and serves as a transition from what they already understand to further more advanced training. Tutors need to decide upon a personal development plan (PDP) which sets out the areas they will focus on in unit 4.

Unit 4 Advanced training (4-6 weeks)

Five sub-areas are identified within this unit: Empathy, Cognitive Aspects, Methodology, Assessment, Community Building. Some of the content and activities are compulsory and others are optional. Tutors focus on the areas they have identified in the PDP in unit 3. The unit is completed with a study of enquiry based practice in preparation of unit 5.

Unit 5 Further reflection/Assessment (1 week)

Trainee tutors complete a portfolio outlining their achievements as well as their future training needs. This serves as a transition to their working as an online tutor.

Reflective Analytic Tools

The module includes a range of bespoke tools designed to support online learning. These tools are server based where they store the necessary digital data and are incorporated into the Moodle learning environment - this allows for flexibility in learning. One might ask why new tools needed to be developed, the answer is that the design of commercial learning environments and the tools they use has not been greatly influenced by the needs of users and this project set out to be led by their ideas. It is perhaps then not surprising that a learning environment design intended for postgraduate work and continuing professional development designed by those with expertise in this area was influenced by the need to support criticality and reflection and those new tools to support this arose. The following describes three examples of the range of tools within the module.

The Workspace

The premise behind the Workspace is simple. If a student is working online then they should be provided with their own personalisable workspace with useful tools for learning, together with an archive of their work in one online space that can be accessed from any computer. The Workspace provides this online facility. This removes some of the organizational and technical barriers that face the online learner and ensures their energies are focused on engaging with the learning materials not the

technology. It provides the learner and their tutor with a comprehensive set of tools (Figure 2) for effective online academic working, reviewing completed activities/work which is archived, note taking, reflective writing, bibliographic referencing, sharing with peers, submitting assignments and getting feedback from their tutor. The Workspace has been developed as a Moodle module and is available for use under a creative commons license. The inclusion of the Workspace in the tutor training module was critical in that it provides tutors with an experience of a range of tools that support online learning and critical reflection that raise questions related to the tutors' role in supporting their learners.

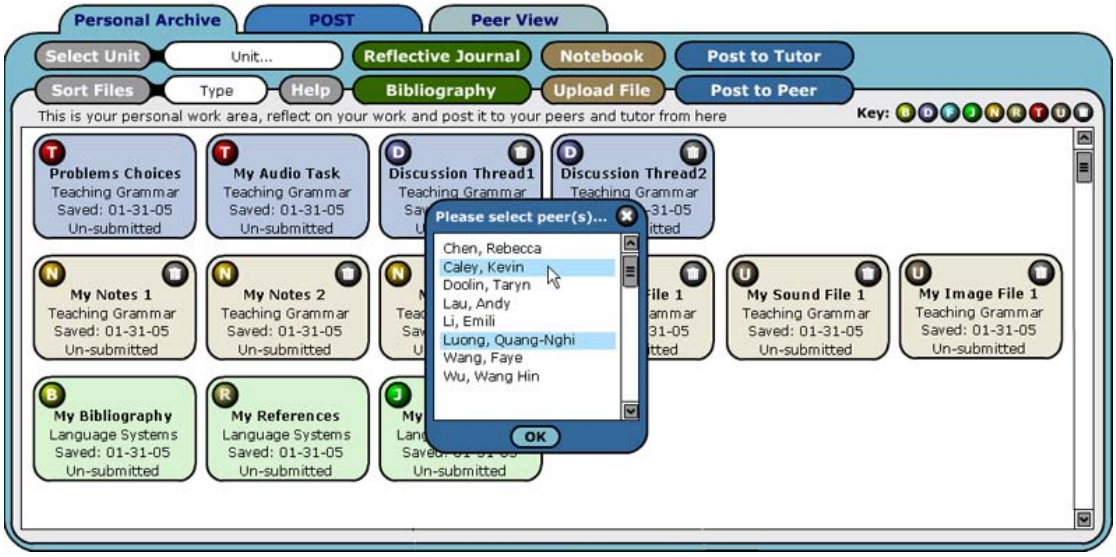

Figure 2 The Workspace

The Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT)

The LAAT (Figure 3) is an online interactive tool that represents an activity system which is a way of visualizing the total configuration of an activity (Engeström, 1978). This approach is based on activity theory (Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978) and it has a been argued that e-learning activities that involve collaborative learning can be seen as types of learning support and can be represented as an activity system (Merrill, 2002 ; Oliver & Herrington, 2001).

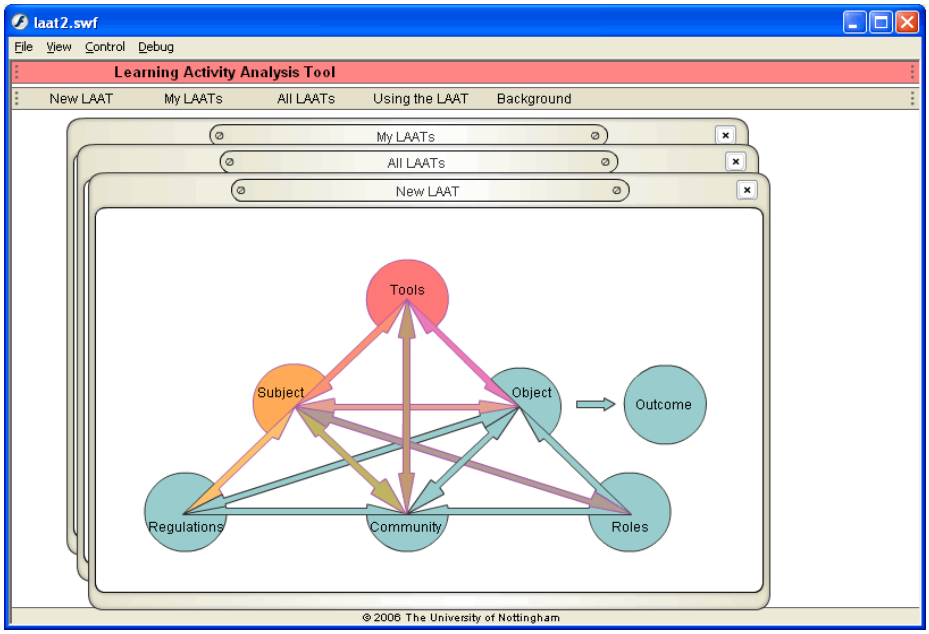

Figure 3 The Learning Activity Analysis Tool (LAAT)

The following considers the activity system, as represented in the LAAT in Figure 3, applied to online learning and the work activity of an online tutor within a course in higher education. The object of this work is to support the student engaged with a particular activity. The outcomes include the intended ones for the students such as ownership of the learning process and successful activity completion i.e. development of knowledge, understanding and skills and associated ones such as skills development. Unintended outcomes such as possible dissatisfaction, non-engagement, tutor-dependence behaviours can have a negative impact on learning. The tools may include communication tools such as email, discussion fora, which may be used to support the development of understanding and encourage engagement. Other tools may be diagnostic and pedagogic-related concepts and methods enabling the tutor to develop an empathy for and an understanding of the student within the wider context for learning in which they are working. The community consists of the tutor and their group, but may include other tutors and staff at the institution. The roles relate to the ways of working expected of the students and the tutor – some of these will be determined by the institution but some will be additionally negotiated within the learning context. Finally, the rules regulate the use of time, the online behaviours, the measurement of outcomes, and the criteria for rewards (or awards).

The LAAT, a key feature of the eEducator training module, is used to provide a framework for the tutor to review online learning activities and so mediate the designed learning experience for the online learners. The LAAT provides the means of matching the designed learning activity to the current context for learning as well as the means by which the trainee tutors are supported in reflecting upon and researching their own practice. In the module, trainee tutors use the LAAT to analyse learning activities and consider the range of strategies that might be used to support their online learners. Their analyses are saved online and can be shared and discussed with their peers in order to develop ongoing understanding of effective practice.

The data produced in the use of the LAAT is revealing interesting issues in relation to perceptions/ beliefs of learning and teaching and this is forming the basis of research at the UoN. It is also beginning to be used as a means of engaging academics and learning technologists at the start of a collaborative learning design process in developing a shared understanding of what effective online learning would be in the learning context being considered.

The On-Line Empathy Training Tool (OLETT)

The Online Empathy Training Tool (OLETT) appears in Unit 4 of the eEducator module and is a learning tool which features in the 'Empathy' sub unit. The intended users are tutors at tertiary level who have identified a personal and professional development need for themselves in the area of creating, building, and maintaining rapport in interpersonal and intergroup virtual communication as well as being able to support the development of policies and protocols for the institutional management of online communities. OLETT is still at the development stage and was trialled by tutors at the University of Science Malaysia.

Empathy and empathic communication processes may be terms which are often only vaguely or poorly comprehended and in some languages (e.g., Chinese) have no direct translation. A definition of the term is provided by Goleman (1996) who argues that empathy is a psychological term which describes the awareness of and ability to sense or feel imaginatively the experiences of others as if they were your own. It is widely perceived to be a strongly pro-social behaviour and a component of what has come to be known as 'emotional intelligence' (EI). It can be understood as a sort of 'social glue' which binds individuals and groups together through shared understandings. Rogers (1961) identified empathy as one of the core conditions for effective interpersonal relationships along with genuineness and positive regard.

However, factors such as interpersonal closeness, intimacy or distance can affect the individual's ability to empathise accurately with others. It is easier to empathise with people we like, know well, or who we believe are in some way 'like us' or share our values. It is much more of an emotional and intellectual labour to empathise with those who we dislike, disagree with or feel hierarchically distanced from – let alone those from different cultural backgrounds, value systems, languages and so on.

Within learner-centred contexts, f2f, blended or wholly online, empathic *appreciation* alone may be insufficient to meet the emotional or learning needs of students. Demonstrations of accurate empathic tutor engagement with learners' affective states are necessary, as is the demonstration of that appreciation and understanding through the design and facilitation of learning and teaching strategies. This is of particular and pressing significance given the growth of knowledge economies, globalisation of the HE sector and internationalisation agendas set by universities worldwide.

Difficulties in developing accurate empathic understandings are potentially heightened in online communications where auditory, visual or sensory data will normally be absent from social, textually mediated online communication such as emails, discussion fora, blogs and so on. Even video conferencing distorts gesture, facial and verbal responsiveness to some extent. Text-based material may be the only clues available to tutors as to what students and colleagues really feel or mean. This

process is made even more complex when the sender themselves may be only dimly aware of their feelings or psychological intentions in interactional messages.

It becomes imperative then that online tutors' ability to read accurately the emotional subtexts contained within virtual text-based interactions is paramount when developing and maintaining interpersonal and intergroup relationships. OLETT was designed to fit alongside a number of other empathy training tools, including an empathy self-rating scale and interactional simulations.

The tool itself involves a three stage process designed to enable online educators to:

- read on-line text-based messages at speed (or under time pressure) and decode accurately the emotional or underlying feelings contained within the written message;
- use a specially devised protocol to author appropriately empathic responses;
- evaluate the quality of these responses from peer feedback;
- goal set for appropriate personal and professional behaviour change.

Stage One

The tool itself displays a user interface which mimics a typical email inbox containing 40 unread emails. Trainees click by item to open the email. The emails are accompanied by a choice of three adjectives and a three point rating scale –best description, next best description and worst description (see Figure 4). Trainees are asked to first read the email and then decide which adjective best describes the emotional subtext of the email sender's message. The trainees' choices are stored to a data base and then they click to the next item in the inbox. This process continues until all 40 items are read and rated. This is a timed exercise and the completion time is displayed onscreen. Tutors are provided with percentage scores for accuracy and time as measured against an expert rater group.

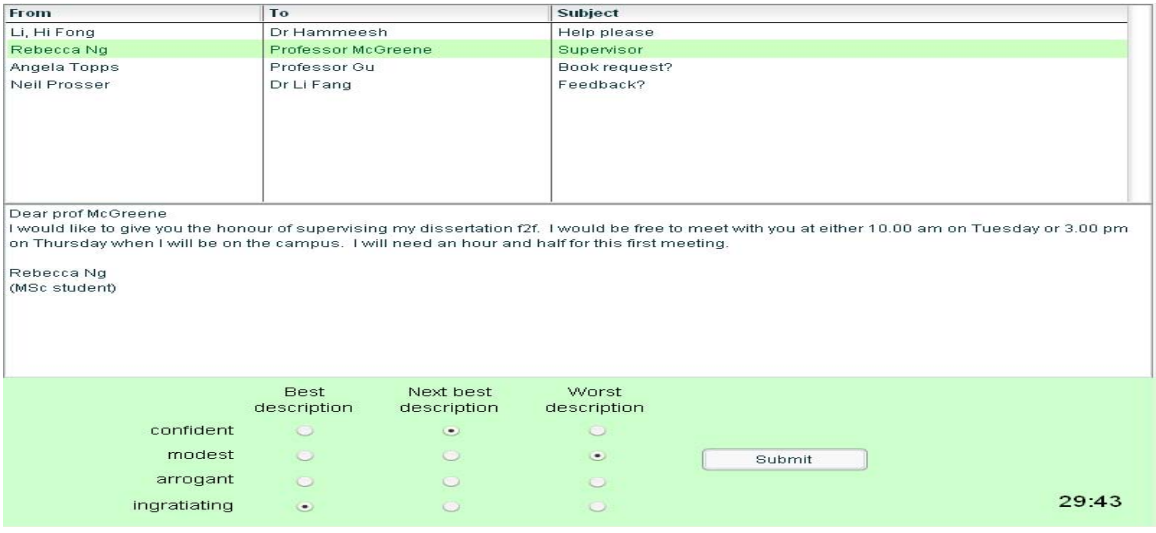

Figure 4 Olett's three point rating scale

Stage 2

Trainees are invited to reflect on their scores and if necessary resume the test until a 90% degree of accuracy has been achieved. They are then asked to compose a number

of empathy-appropriate responses to the emails, using what we have termed the AWARE protocol, (**A**wareness, **W**armth, **A**ppropriacy, **R**esponsiveness and **E**mpathy) this is derived from the tenets of humanistic psychology and allied research (Egan, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1988; Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961) and developed here by the authors, Hall and Hall.

Stage 3
Tutors are assigned electronically to learning sets of four members and each member is asked to post their responses to other members of the learning set. These responses are reviewed and evaluated by the members of the learning set and feedback is given in relation to the criteria outlined in the AWARE protocol. Tutors are asked to consider and reflect on their learning from this feedback and identify behaviour changes which might result from it. They are further asked to consider other professional development needs and opportunities in the light of the feedback.

OLETT Design Features
At the design stage of OLETT, 8 trained and experienced counsellors were invited to undertake the OLETT exercise as independent expert raters. The group was a culturally diverse group, the majority of whom had long experience of working in the tertiary sector with international students. The group comprised 5 men and 3 women. An analysis of their choice of responses determined the 'optimal' response choice which the tutors are compared against. Tutor choices are compared in the database against the expert raters and the score revealed. In order to mimic 'real life' situations, OLETT also provides the tutor with a speed as well as an accuracy score. The tutors work under significant time pressure. In online tutoring some may even be working across time zones. It may prove to be of significance that the ability to empathise accurately over even relatively small periods of time deteriorates as less attention is given to the process of reading and even less to the accurate decoding of the emotional subtexts of the message.

The Malaysian Pilot

Development of distance education in USM
In 1971, USM set up a distance education unit known as the Off-Campus Unit in the Centre for Educational Studies or Pusat Pengajian Luar Kampus (PPLK). When the Off-Campus Unit was first set up, it offered only arts programmes in humanities and social sciences. Science courses and other courses followed later.

From 1983 onwards, PPLK functioned as a school of study within the university and was given control of both academic and administrative responsibilities. However, it was not allowed to award degrees. Two major decisions made in 1992 and 1994 respectively, can be seen to signal the transformation of the distance education programmes at USM into a new phase of development – the waiver exempting students from converting to full-time study for the final year, and another waiver, two years later, exempting new courses at the PPLK from having equivalent courses in the on-campus mode. Its name was subsequently changed to the Centre for Distance Education, or Pusat Pendidikan Jarak Jauh (PPJJ) in 1994.

Course development and delivery

PPLK had to experiment with innovative models of course material development for its students in view of the fact that their students had limited access in their home towns to required text books. On top of this these students were mainly from the Malay medium. Hence they had difficulty comprehending reference books in English. Two models of course materials were developed over the years (Md. Noor Salleh, 1999). In the first model, a comprehensive study guide was written around a recognized textbook or collection of readings. This exposed students to original writings of authoritative and distinguished scholars in the subject areas and at the same time provided comprehensive guidance to facilitate students in their reading of the original articles or books. In the second model, comprehensive self-contained and interactive modular texts (commonly known as 'modules' in the PPLK) were created (especially in the science and mathematics courses). They were detailed and comprehensive, and interweaved the subject content of the course and the didactics of the instructor. It allowed a maximum amount of guidance and was delivered in an interactive and friendly manner.

By the early 1980s, the PPLK developed its own housestyle of writing as a result of technical advice from consultants from Britain, Canada and Australia. The housestyle which encouraged writers to adopt an informal and conversational style of writing was suitable for the distance learning students. In addition to this, courses were developed through a process that involved planning, development, production and evaluation. The team usually comprised one or more instructors (the subject specialist and writer), an instructional designer, a graphic designer, an editor, a media facilitator, and a production manager. Another major change in course development in the USM model was the gradual shift from reliance on the on-campus staff in the preparation of course materials to full-time academic staff (over 50% were PhD holders) who had recently returned to the country.

As in other distance education systems, print materials constituted the primary learning resources for, and channel of communication with the students. Although the PPLK imposed a 30% non-print media component requirement on all courseware, audio and video cassette media had not been used extensively. Several high quality video tapes were produced from 1989 to 1992 through government's funding. However, the substantial investment, in terms of time, effort and money, deterred academic staff from such ventures.

Student support systems

Two important support services were provided directly from the main campus. They were the library and the counselling services. At the USM's main library, a special unit was set up to cater to PPLK students. Books and journal articles were loaned to students throughout the country via the postal service. The PPLK operated a counselling service. There was also a 24 hours counselling telephone line that the students could use to seek advice.

The USM system has never been entirely 'distanced' and students do not undertake the study on an entirely independent study basis. The delivery system of all the courses incorporates two essential components of continuous lectures and tutorials. Each year, all students are required to attend a three week residential school at the main campus in Penang where mid-term tests, engineering workshop sessions, and

laboratory work requiring sophisticated equipment of specialized chemicals, not available at the regional centres, are conducted. In addition, students are required to attend tutorials at the regional centres nearest to their residence (Rozhan Mohammad Idrus & Abdul Rasid Mat Zin, 1992).

From 1972 to 1986, the tutorials were conducted by regional tutors, comprising school teachers from the various regions. However, they were gradually phased out when an interactive audio graphic conferencing facility was introduced in 1987. The instructor (manager of the course concerned) would conduct his/her tutorial from the Penang campus, using synchronous two-way audio conferencing facility to communicate with the students throughout the country. The use of the audio graphic conferencing facility at PPLK was considered to be more effective than localised tutorials, in term of cost and logistics, as the tutorials were now conducted directly by the course instructor (Mohd. Ridzuan, 1992).

However, the regional centres still served as important resource centres where set text books, reference books, photocopies of journal articles, reports, past examination papers and non-print media materials were all made available. The most significant innovation was the installation of a multi-million Ringgit state-of-the-art video conferencing system in 1994 which linked USM main campus with all the regional centres (Md. Noor Saleh, 1999). The 2 mbps microwave system provided full-motion video to all the regional centres with additional capacity of transmitting visuals in the form of transparencies, video clips and other graphics. It allowed two-way interactive and live video conferencing, that in many ways simulated the face-to-face teaching-learning sessions, found in the conventional classroom. An in-depth study of the effectiveness of teaching-learning through video-conferencing concluded that in terms of teaching-learning, video conferencing was as effective as face-to-face delivery (Shaffe Mohd. Daud, 2000). Recently USM have started using Moodle as well as online video streaming of lectures and the School is exploring how these new technologies as well as others might be used effectively within their courses. These new tools have implications for the tutor's role and as such USM was an ideal site to research localisation, i.e., how effective the eEducator module would be in a new context.

Localisation in USM

Altogether eight staff members from USM took part in the pilot study. Six tutors undertook to work through the different units of the module and undertake all the eEducator tasks required which include online forum discussions and online activities. They were also required to complete Blogs entries at regular intervals, i.e., after the first workshop and on completion of each unit, to reflect upon their experience and the relevance of the materials to their practice. Two mentors from USM were appointed to support them locally and they were also provided with a Blog to record reflections. In addition, two mentors from the University of Nottingham team provided online support. Five of the tutors were from the School Of Distance Education and one from the School of Educational Studies. Two from the School of Distance Education majored in Science (Biology and Chemistry), one in Mathematics, one in English as a Second Language (ESL) and one in Organisational behaviour. The tutor from the School of Educational Studies was previously a Biology teacher. All except the ESL tutor possessed a PhD. Their years of distance teaching experience ranged from one-and-a-half years to twenty-three years. All of them described their confidence in ICT

as 3 except for one that rated herself as 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 4 (with 1 being low and 4 high). The ESL tutor had to support more than 1000 students whereas the rest had to support between 100 to 300 students.

A series of three workshops were planned. The first workshop conducted in the third week of March 2007 was an induction and orientation session to introduce the eEducator module, its structure and ways of working. The learning tools were also introduced. A focus group interview was conducted to find out the tutors' preliminary reactions towards the module. The second workshop was conducted two months later in the third week of May 2007. The main aims of the second workshop were to support work on Units 2, 3, and 4 and to introduce the LAAT. A hands-on session was incorporated to enable the tutors test out the LAAT. A questionnaire and a focus group interview were also conducted to give the tutors an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of Units 1 and 2 and to document the necessary background information of the tutors. A third workshop was carried out in the first week of August 2007. The intention of this workshop was to introduce Unit 5 and to capture the tutors' reactions to unit four and their overall view of the module through a focus group interview. The findings below report the reactions of the tutors towards the course that provide some answers to the suitability of the module to their local context.

Preliminary reactions of tutors

The following data from the focus groups and project blog provides some indication of tutors' readiness for the module and to the suitability of the pedagogy underpinning module. There is clear evidence that the module challenged and supported tutors from a range of different subject disciplines to rethink established practice within their own contexts.

The six tutors showed an awareness of both the strengths and the weaknesses of their programmes at USM and looked forward to learning from the project, sharing the knowledge they learnt and participating in future collaborative work as indicated below.

> I am hoping that whatever I've learnt here would be able to convince our colleagues and I actually look forward to make a change, to change the way we run things because our curriculum is like 20 years old. I think it's time to change otherwise we'll be left behind.

> As far as the module is concerned, what I can see is the final product, maybe we can use it to train the other lecturers so that they will learn or know there are a lot more things that you have to do in supporting your students. You have to give them a lot of support and guide to make them go through, especially the induction period. And for us we'll be thinking how to improve ourselves as a distant learner tutor.

The tutors were happy to discuss key pedagogic issues within their courses and develop new approaches, but had not had the opportunity to do this. The module acted as a catalyst and tools such as the LAAT and OLETT were viewed as actively supporting this. The reaction to these tools was overwhelmingly positive.

The tutors were asked to reflect upon the value of the LAAT and all six were very positive about their experience of using it and felt it to be a '*very useful or effective*' tool for analysing learning activities. For example:

> I find the LAAT to be very effective in analyzing all important and interrelated aspects of any teaching-learning activities.

It was viewed as

> …an eye opener…it prompts the tutor to think before giving a task to students. It raises my awareness of key issues like the objectives of the proposed task, who my learners are, the roles etc. before I give a task. Hence, I consider all aspects of the teaching-learning process. By doing the LAAT, the task would be well-planned and focussed, making the teaching-learning process clear.

The tutors appreciated the ways the LAAT focussed on "the whole picture of an activity and not leave out any components that might be important". As well as supporting online tutors in "a critical discussion on the approaches used".

Several specific references were made to OLETT during the focus group discussions and the following example provides evidence of changing practice. Some tutors expressed doubts early on about the possibility of being empathic in an email response because of the sheer volume they received daily with more than a thousand students enrolled on courses with them.

> I opened my email and there were 303 emails. And how do I think of empathy and God knows what when I'm doing it. I just can't. I just have to go straight to the point and tell them this or that.

It was as if having had the concept and practice of empathy raised into their consciousness there was an initial emotional resistance to permitting the implications of allowing empathy to become a 'way of being' (Rogers, 1975). This might be seen as unreadiness or unpreparedness to change behaviour despite learning having occurred. Later, the same tutor was reporting her experience of the learning she had gained from working through OLETT at a Symposium and during questions she was asked about the problem of being empathic when there were a large volume of emails to respond to. Her response indicated a change of attitude: "You don't have to increase the number of words you say to be more empathic, it's a question of the words you choose." The initial emotional resistance appeared to have lowered over time as continued practice embedded the learning more securely.

There is further clear evidence from the six tutors' blogs of their examining assumptions about their online students and considering the implications for their own practice. These are examples taken from reflection on the work they undertook on information literacy and criticality in Unit four of the module.

> I find this unit challenging and very useful. It made me wonder how well prepared are the students on information literacy. Have they been taught on how to do online search, how to select information, evaluate, organize it into related ideas and concepts?

I think because our students are adults, we just assume they have the skills to conduct online search on their own. After going through the provided articles on information literacy, I feel that it is wrong to assume all students have the necessary skills to do so without some guidelines from the tutor. At this point I am trying to figure out where we shall put the 'training' on information literacy.

It was challenging as it made me think critically about my role as a tutor-whether I am teaching my students to think critically. I find this unit very apt as sometimes we overlook criticality in our course content. Hence, we accept mediocre work from our students, which do not reflect a deep level of thinking, as sufficient. I have always wanted my students to be able to think critically and produce work that depicts deep thinking. I want to learn how to do this effectively online.

I find the article 'Teaching Critical Thinking through Online Discussion' very useful especially the list of questions to act as prompt for tutors to drive ideas from students and thus encourage them to develop and apply critical thinking skills. I find myself referring to the list (in the article) quite often when responding to student in the discussion group and also while developing assessment/examination questions to get ideas on how to frame the questions to elicit critical responses from the students.

Conclusion

Although the tutors taking part in this study come from a distance learning environment, their exposure to online tutoring was rather limited. Thus, they were appropriate subjects for this study. They provided the necessary insights into the effectiveness of the eEducator module within their local context and has shown the efficacy of the design approach. Further analysis of the data will be undertaken as well as research around the tools developed within the project and this will be the focus of future publications. n training them for their present context. They will also be able to give suitable recommendations on how to improve the module if they find it lacking or inappropriate in certain aspects. This includes suggesting ways on how to adapt the module for the Malaysian context. Further information about the research project and access to the tools can be found at: www.echinauk.org.

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