

A Vision For E-Learning:
Migrants Hope

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Assignment 1: A Vision for E-Learning

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Part 1: The Context

The Organization

We are a small new charity based in Hong Kong called Migrants Hope. Our organization is focused on China and in particular the migrants that move into the big cities from the countryside for employment. We work in a number of areas such as developing community centers and providing education for children. However, the specific area that I will focus on for this assignment is the training of migrant pastors. We have a face-to-face program in place, and the instructors consist of our colleagues plus guest lecturers from within and outside of China. The training consists of theology, Bible, church life, missions, community development, and Biblical language studies. In the past we have run two programs a year (one part-time, one full-time), each with approximately 15 students.

The Students

The students are migrants from the countryside who are currently church leaders in the city. Most lead multiple congregations, have had relatively little education (around middle school), and live on meager salaries. Although their educational experience is limited, they have proven that they can engage in rigorous academic exercises, and think critically about issues. They have approached us to help them with further training. It is not feasible for them to leave China due to language barriers and economic reasons, neither would they be able to gain admission into higher learning institutions in China or overseas. There are some resources from outside China that have been translated into Chinese, but these students are looking for a flexible program that will provide the resources they need, including formal credentials if possible.

Our Staff

Currently we have one staff/faculty person who is providing vision, designing programs and training materials, and facilitating the programs. He has a Masters of Theology (ThM) from Canada, experience setting up and running training programs for this area of study, has been a sessional instructor in a Bible school in Canada, and speaks Mandarin. He is currently embarking on a doctorate of missiology. In addition, I am advising regarding the feasibility of implementing some e-Learning components for a new program. I have B.Ed. and have almost completed a Master's of Educational Technology through the UBC MET program.

Part 2: The Environmental Scan

According to Bullen and Janes (2007), e-Learning has taken on a number of meanings and therefore before we are able to present an environmental scan associated with e-Learning, we need to define what it will mean in our context. On the e-Learning continuum (Bullen & Janes, 2007) we will locate our programs as mixed-mode: classroom and online. Some of our courses will be fully online and therefore resemble distance education, while others will use a combination of face-to-face seminars coupled with online coursework.

External Factors

Funding/Economy. Because we are a charity and provide education free to our students, we rely completely on donations. Donations are dependent on the economy and the good will of philanthropists. Most of our donations come through Hong Kong and we have not seen a decline in the uncertain times that currently exist, however we are dependent and

this is a serious risk factor in establishing and maintaining a move to e-Learning which is costly (Bates and Sangrà, 2011).

Government Control. Internet access in China is tightly controlled and many websites including online courses, and Web 2.0 tools such as Google Docs are either completely or intermittently restricted. At this time, Moodle is accessible and used by many schools. While every effort will be made to use tools that are available, the inconsistent nature of restriction and release may at times have serious effect on our ability to provide a consistent product.

University Affiliation/Certification. A major goal in implementing this program is to provide a formal certificate through a recognized university to our students. We have identified a North American university that offers a certificate program and has agreed to let us reuse and repurpose their material under an open educational resources (OER) model. This will provide several positive advantages such as reducing the high cost of teaching materials, opening up opportunities to those normally “shut out,” and reducing the time needed to prepare materials (Baraniuk, 2006, p. 230). However, we recognize that there will be issues when seeking certification such as the determination of quality. In addition, the majority of our students only have a middle school education. They would not normally be eligible to enter any university either in their own country or overseas. These issues need to be negotiated with the pertinent educational bodies. While the granting of a certificate will not directly affect the use of online learning, it does indirectly affect the overall value of what we offer.

Demographics. In new reforms, the government of China is actively seeking to improve the lives of migrant workers through educational policy changes. Increased funding is going toward educating young migrants in a bid to open universities wider (Bradsher, 2013). While this will not affect our students in the next five years, it will mean a change in the educational levels of our future students and an improved personal economic situation. It may be possible in the future to begin charging tuition to ease the burden on donations.

Academic Resources. One of the main reasons for offering online education is to take advantage of the quality of resources available in North American educational settings. Although course content can be easily translated, academic research resources will be limited due to the language barrier. We need to seek out alternatives online resource materials including providing an anthology, the possibility of online Chinese journals, and the feasibility of accessing a Chinese seminary library.

Internal Factors

Board approval/strategic planning. Our ability to implement this e-Learning strategy is directly dependent on the fit with the organizational five-year plan (which still needs to be created) and board approval.

Cost. Bates & Sangrà (2011) warn that a move to e-Learning is costly, however they concede that the cost will vary depending on the context. Since we are a very small operation and are planning to only implement one program over the next five years, our

costs will be manageable. We anticipate that the initial cost will be high due to the need to develop programs, an e-Learning space, and hire new staff. Eventually though, given the low number of courses per year, and the relative stability of the course content, the cost will stabilize for the current model. A realistic and transparent cost analysis will need to be researched and presented including estimates for planning, overheads, development, maintenance, delivery, program administration, faculty, and learning technology support staff (Bates & Sangrà, 2011).

Staffing levels. Imperative to the move to e-Learning is staffing. For the vision to work we need part time support staff (administrative and IT), a course designer with education experience, at least one academic advisor, and sessional instructors. While English is acceptable for the instructors who will conduct the intensive face-to-face sessions with translation, the online course instructors and facilitators will be required to speak, read, and write Mandarin in order to engage with and assess the students. Additionally, they will need to have the appropriate educational subject qualifications. Our ability to provide these courses is dependent on finding the right candidates.

Training. Post-secondary education teachers, while experts in the subjects are not known for their training in teaching (Bates & Sangrà, 2011). Our instructors and facilitators will need adequate training in the use of technology, but more importantly in areas such as learning theories, learning technologies, design for teaching, epistemology and cultural issues related to learning. Students will also need training in how to utilize the technology and how to be successful in an online setting. We need to carefully consider issues of

training for both instructors and students in order to both offer quality online education and gain a realistic understanding of the financial commitment.

Technical support. Crucial to the e-Learning plan is technical issues such as hardware, software, server/hosting issues as well as ongoing support for staff and students once the program goes into effect.

Courses. Vital to the success of the move to e-Learning is the development and translation of the course work. We must be able to find qualified translators that also have some knowledge in the content area. In addition we require designers who can create and package the online courses.

Students. Two major issues that could affect the move from completely face-to-face learning to a majority of e-Learning with some face-to-face learning are culture and education.

Culture. On the Cultural Dimensions of Learning Framework (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschoot, 2010) Chinese education and cultural practices fall on the side of authority rather than equality. Students tend to view the teacher as the authority with all the information. This is directly opposite to a theory of education where the teacher is a guide and students are responsible for their own learning. We feel that this is the best approach in providing a quality, online education but recognize that cultural issue may affect learning in this context. Additionally,

Speece (2010) notes that “Chinese students use more social context cues in communication” which are notably absent in the online environment. These issues will require a discussion of expectations and educational models at the outset, as well as consideration in the design of the courses.

Educational level. Our students have relatively little education and therefore limited experience in an academic environment. A face-to-face model is likely to offer far more support to struggling students. The move to e-Learning, while having many positive outcomes, could affect motivation and the quality of their work. Along with the academic advisor, a high level of instructor presence will be required in the online courses, which will need to be considered in the financial plan.

Part 3: The Vision

Rationale

Seminary training programs of this type are limited in China and resources are scarce. Those that do exist tend to be non-formal and do not offer recognized certificates or degrees, something that is increasingly important in a Chinese church context. In fact, our own current programs, although rigorous academically, have not been connected to any accrediting agency. Other countries, and particularly North America, provide a wealth of resources in this subject area that may be lacking in a “developing country” (Bullen, 2013, p.5) such as China. To

broaden our students' horizons and to provide flexible, cost effective and quality training (Bates & Sangrà, 2011; Bullen, 2013) that leads to a credential, it is necessary to look for ways to connect students in China with resources overseas. We believe that adding an online component to our training will enable us to meet our objective of offering quality theological education for Chinese church leaders.

Program Vision

Our vision is to offer a ten-course (30 credit) blended learning certificate program over two and a half years. Students will enter as a cohort of approximately 15-20 students. Five of the courses will consist of face-to-face, intensive modular instruction for 1-2 weeks. Ongoing coursework will be completed through an online space. The other five courses will be administered completely online. A sessional instructor aided by a teaching assistant or course facilitator will conduct each of the ten courses. In addition one academic advisor will guide each cohort throughout the two and a half years of study. Our estimated starting date is September 2013 with two courses and one cohort of students. There will be three semesters per year. By September 2014 we plan to add a second cohort. Second-year students could potentially be combined with the new cohort for face-to-face intensive courses to maximize cost and efficiency. Students will remain as separate cohorts in the online context to ensure quality interaction and manageable instructor workloads (Bates & Sangrà, 2011). In our educational philosophy, the teacher/facilitator to student ratio should remain relatively small in order to promote quality learning through mentoring relationships. For this reason, we do not foresee great numerical growth in the size or number of cohorts over the first five years of operation. We aim to add one cohort per year with a formal plan review scheduled for 2015.

Changes

To this point, our training has been conducted completely face-to-face in a classroom setting. E-Learning will require changes in infrastructure as well as recruiting some additional staff with relevant expertise. While costs will increase in terms of the e-Learning aspect, they will decrease in other areas such as rent and other expenses required in maintaining a classroom. Moreover, as this new model is intrinsically more flexible, students may expect to travel less and make fewer logistical arrangements (i.e. child care).

Part 4: Implications

Essentially, this e-Learning transition must be built from the ground up in order to implement the new vision.

Institutional Changes

Bates & Sangrà (2011) recommend that in order for e-Learning to be effectively established, departmental plans need to align and be integrated with the overall institutional plans. As a start up charity, the mission statement and objectives are in place, however we need to establish a five-year plan for the whole organization, including an operating budget. The organization needs to develop its presence and notoriety through the design of a webpage and publications in order to raise funds. Once these things are in place we should review the educational vision to make sure it aligns with the main vision.

Program Advisory Committee

In order to ensure quality and standards an advisory committee made up of members with higher education learning experience will need to be established to provide guidance in the creation of the program.

Course Materials

New course materials will need to be developed. Five of the courses currently exist in an online format through a university in the United States. This university has agreed to make available their courses to be used and reworked for our own context in an open courseware kind of agreement. Complete translation of the courses into Mandarin along with a reworking of the bibliography and assigned readings to reflect what is available to students in the Chinese context is required. In addition, the technological tools, which are currently utilized in these courses, will need to be assessed for “ease of use” (Bates and Poole, 2006, p. 87) in terms of what is available in a China context. The remaining five courses will need to be developed and designed with the face-to-face and online components. Although these will be delivered through Moodle, a “teacher-controlled tool” (Downes cited in Bates & Sangrà, 2011, p. 48) the design will take into consideration constructivist learning theories so as to provide quality, interactive, knowledge building education using Web 2.0 tools, rather than a traditional text-dominant model of distance learning.

Technology

Based on the Bates & Poole (2006) SECTIONS framework we have already determined that Moodle will be the best LMS platform to meet our needs given its cost effectiveness,

language capabilities, accessibility within China, and the fact that the five courses from the university are already designed and hosted on Moodle. A crucial decision that needs to be made is whether we will pay for outside hosting or set up our own server in Hong Kong. In order to do this, we need to hire a part-time (at this point) technology coordinator with both instructional and technical expertise who can advise the planning committee, and train students and facilitator/instructors. In addition, to package the courses, we will need someone on a “short-term contract” (Bates & Sangrà, 2011, p. 118) who has instructional design experience. We do not feel it is necessary at this point in the plan to have an automated administrative software system in place. Due to the size of the project and the low number of participants, basic Microsoft Office tools are sufficient.

Staff

We will need to add some part-time staff, along with recruiting of sessional instructors and facilitators. Part-time staff will include a program coordinator responsible to report to our director, an administrator, and a technology coordinator based in Hong Kong, but expected to travel into China. Instructors/professors will largely be from North America, although qualified individuals from the region may be considered. Instructors will be sessional and from outside our organization therefore, changes in their work would be outside of our purview and based on their own ability to arrange their schedule to meet their commitments. However, what will concern us is calculating teaching workload and a fair rate of pay for each course. In addition, as a start-up cost, we will need to hire one or two people to translate the courses into Chinese and a designer to prepare the course in the online format.

Funding

Due to the economic status of our students, we provide all the funding for their education through our charity. In the past years our annual education budget has been \$25,000 Canadian. A new realistic and transparent (to hidden costs) budget needs to be determined based on the changes envisioned. Once this budget has received board approval, the funds will need to be raised in order to effect any changes.

Training

Bates & Sangrà (2011) suggest that one of the barriers to change is adequate training for all stakeholders. We will need to build in planning for training and ongoing support for two groups. Firstly, all instructor/facilitators and teaching assistants will need training in the course content, how to effectively manage and facilitate an online course based on constructivist learning theories, and how to use the technology such as Moodle and other Web 2.0 tools. Secondly, the students will need training in how to use Moodle as well as understanding the expectations for a constructivist-learning environment.

Students

The addition of online learning will be a major change for our students. In his work *Technopoly*, Postman (1997) speaks of the addition of new technology as being “both a burden and blessing.” Our students will find blessing through the flexibility and access that e-Learning affords. By studying part time (two courses per semester) they will be able to continue their work but have access to quality education not currently available to them. In terms of burden, they will need to learn how to use technology and interact in a constructivist environment, which is

different to their educational and cultural experience. Additionally, online education requires self-discipline and initiative. As this is a new experience for all of the students, it will require an adjustment as it replaces the on-campus type education they have received in the past. It is one of the reasons we feel that our program should start with the mixed-mode courses first in order to ease our students into an e-Learning environment.

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