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The Integration of Chinese Cultural Studies with Different Courses: Development of Teaching Pedagogy Utilising a Web-based Package

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Preamble

The learning of Chinese culture is always realised through Chinese language study. However, with the new curriculum reform in the new millennium, cross-discipline study is encouraged (Curriculum Development Council, 2001) because too much emphasis was placed on individual course learning, which did not help students to stitch patches of knowledge into a full picture. The project team decided to draw on information of four courses, namely: Chinese Language, Chinese Literature, Chinese History and Liberal Studies into one web-based package. The design of learning support system helped students learn effectively in an autonomous context. The team members hoped to explore the learning of knowledge with the design of information and computer technology-based learning system to advance our teaching pedagogy in higher education. It is essential for faculty members to realise that "helping learners to develop their own power of metacognitive learning to learn knowledge and skills will be increasingly essential as we are faced with an increasing range of systems, tools, and facilities enabling us to access and confront ever vaster amounts of information." (Ford, 2008: 327)

Abstract

The new curriculum developed by the Curriculum Development Council in 2001 suggested the integration of different Key Learning Areas into single learning units or into project learning (2001: 23). Interactive learning using information technology was also recommended. This project aimed to utilise the web to develop teaching pedagogy involving the integration of Chinese cultural studies with courses Chinese Language, Chinese Literature, Chinese History and Liberal Studies, and to enhance students' interest in and autonomous study of Chinese culture through computer technology-based learning system. This project resulted in the development of a multimedia web-based package to assist students in different education courses, in particular

those who have to carry out practicum in schools and who are keen on learning Chinese culture. It was also helpful to colleagues who lecture on cross-disciplinary topics.

Keywords

Chinese cultural studies, web-based package for teaching and learning, cross-discipline study

Introduction

Computer technology is employed in teaching courses such as Chinese Language and History, and especially in the area of Chinese cultural studies. However, in this latter area, few good websites have been developed in Hong Kong. This project aimed to produce a multimedia web-based learning package to facilitate the learning and teaching of an integrated study of Chinese culture with different courses. The Yangtze Delta Region (長江三角洲), with the city of Shanghai as the centre and radiating to the two neighbouring provinces of Jiangsu (江蘇) and Zhejiang (浙江), was chosen as the focus of this project because of the rich cultural heritage of the Yangtze Delta Region. The project team responded positively to the curriculum development of the Education Bureau (EDB) on the study of "river culture". This would prepare our students better for their course teaching in schools.

This project provided a chance for different course teams in the Department to work together towards a meaningful goal.

Aims and Objectives

The aims of the project were to develop teaching pedagogy in web-based teaching, and to enhance students' interest and

self-learning skills in the study of Chinese culture. The package could be used by instructors during class teaching of specialised courses, such as Chinese, Chinese History, Liberal Studies (LS) and even Information Technology (IT).

Other educational objectives were:

1. To provide students with a comprehensive view of the development of Chinese culture in the Yangtze Delta Region;
2. To cultivate in our students an appreciation and understanding of the uniqueness of Chinese culture;
3. To cultivate in our students an identification with Chinese culture;
4. To develop a multimedia web-based package that would stimulate students' interest in and thought about the course of Chinese culture;
5. To promote the use of information technology in education; and
6. To encourage the cross-disciplinary collaboration of different course areas among staff members and students in the Department of Education Studies.

Methodology

The methodology of the project included the following components:

1. *Categorisation of major fields of cultural study and studying of the curriculum objectives:*

The package targeted university students in both classroom and self-learning environments. The learning units were developed according to four categories of study. The content of these categories are included in the curriculum of the Chinese Language and Literature, Chinese History and Liberal Studies Key Learning Areas (KLAs) (Curriculum Development Council, 2002; Curriculum Development Council & Hong Kong Examinations & Assessment Authority, 2007a, 2007b, & 2007c).

- Major historical events - From modern to contemporary China (1842 to present);
- Literature development - Many modern writers were born in the Yangtze Delta Region, or else studied or spent a significant period of time in Shanghai or in the Yangtze Delta Region;
- Modern educators who were born and brought up in this Region; and
- Gardening and landscaping and the layout of some riverside towns are introduced to students to provide them with a glimpse into the life of Chinese in the past.

2. *Collection of data and relevant materials:*

- all relevant materials (books, journals, newspapers, audio-visual materials, web-sites, etc.) related to the above four categories;
- materials collected from collaborating departments and universities; and
- Principal Investigator and Co-investigators conducted field trips to the Yangtze Delta Region. All photos and videos were taken by the Principal Investigator and Co-investigators to avoid copyright issues.

3. *Pedagogical design:*

This web-based package does not provide information only. The categories chosen, and hence the materials collected, corresponded to the present curriculum in Chinese Language and Literature, Chinese History and Liberal Studies. Teaching strategies are suggested in these KLAs.

4. *Design and programming for web-based teaching and learning package:*

The materials were installed and incorporated into the Internet server of the Department of Education Studies. The database, search engine and user interfaces were organised by a computer specialist. They fit into a website structure that was usable internally within the Department by instructors and students.

5. *Using the web-based package for teaching and learning:*

The website is accessible to staff and students of the Department for teaching and learning. Instructors could use it to demonstrate how IT would help in the process of teaching. Students could use it for class preparation and presentation.

Results/Findings

The Teaching Development Grants provided us with an opportunity to develop an online web-based cultural study package for the instructors and students of the Department of Education Studies. Before opening the website to students, the team invited two other colleagues of the Department, whose expertise is in the field of Liberal Studies Teaching, to try the website and give comments. Some feedback from our colleagues included:

- **Chinese Literature**

Helpful, informative, resourceful, organised and cater for the needs of the teachers;

Good teaching exemplars in the Literature session, but not in other sections.

- **Chinese History**

Again organised and informative. User friendly;

Is it possible to provide a key storyline to link all incidents described in each region? It would be difficult to make sense of the incidents in isolation;

Some important historical events are missing;

Teaching exemplars should be provided in this section too.

- **Education**

Good choice of educators;

Educational philosophy of two important figures is too brief and abstract.

- **Others**

Captions or description of some photographs are not given or are not clearly written;

More photographs could be provided for illustration;

Linkages to other relevant websites are useful, but some of these links do not work;

The name of the website as appeared in the bar at the bottom of the screen is confusing.

With the comments from our colleagues, the team improved the websites. The different categories are interconnected through hyperlinks. On each page, other links are included to facilitate the viewers' search for further information. The package is rich in materials with explanations, photos, videos and maps. Above all, teaching strategies are suggested to help viewers to use these materials.

Discussion

As the materials available for study of culture are voluminous, the project team decided to concentrate on just one region with four major categories. The content and pedagogical approaches of the four categories (the historical events, literary and famous figures, education development, and the art of gardening and layout of small towns) were discussed in the light of the curriculum goals and objectives of each KLA. Students could learn culture in a multi-dimensional way. For example, when the viewer wants to know about the war in Shanghai with Japan in 1940, he/she can also surf the literature category to check how it affected the writers at that time. While one reads the works of Lu Xun depicting the struggle of poor people under capitalism, he/she can check the historical events in China from 1911 onwards. When the student-teacher is checking the lesson plan on teaching a certain piece of work of Feng Zikai, he/she can also appreciate Feng's engraving works showing the daily life of people. The viewer can surf all related categories within the site and also other web sites outside the Hong Kong Baptist University. This helps the viewer to further strengthen his or her knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. This package not only helped students to obtain data and information in a systematic way, but also assisted students to think independently and to develop autonomous learning.

The log-in was monitored by instructors to check that students were using the package for their study and teaching.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Questionnaires were sent to Chinese and Liberal Studies major students in the Department of Education Studies by email to solicit their views on using the website. Questions included their comments on the structure and user-friendliness of the website. The amount of information, appropriateness, and relevancy of learning and teaching in each category were asked. Most of the feedback was positive. The students commented that this web-based package on Chinese culture was very focused on one region, with clearly defined categories to facilitate teaching and learning. Moreover, the different dimensions in Chinese culture were put onto one platform for a clear understanding of the development of Chinese culture. They also liked to surf the different sites linked to our project to further their knowledge in a particular area.

The contributions were two-fold:

The project widened the knowledge of the instructors on Chinese history, literature, Chinese gardening and layout of old towns. While collecting materials and undertaking field trips, the instructors were able to collect primary materials on-site and from archives. It also helped the instructors to realise the benefit of integrating the data and information of different courses into a platform that enabled students to learn the courses in a more holistic way.

The web-based package served as a facilitator for the learning of Chinese culture in a multi-dimensional way. While putting all the jigsaw pieces together, students could get a glimpse of the full picture of China. Moreover, the site would guide them to other sites to help them construct their own knowledge by autonomous learning. In addition, during practicum, the students could check the teaching strategies recommended and materials provided to facilitate their own teaching.

Limitations/Difficulties

As with other web-based materials, it was difficult to maintain and update materials. Often, after a few months, some links were broken. Moreover, other new sites on Chinese culture appeared and changed very quickly, so the team had to check the sites frequently during the process of developing this platform.

The Yangtze Delta Region is a vast area. With limited funding, we could only travel to Nanjing, Zhenjiang, Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shaoxing. However, with the two trips, we were able to take many photos and videos, and purchased some materials ourselves.

When we put forward the proposal for this project, we tried not to overlap with other websites on Chinese culture. We thus focused on the Yangtze Delta Region and added the pedagogical component into our package. However, we found last year that another website on Chinese

culture had added the Yangtze component. When we conducted the pilot study, some colleagues and students commented that our site overlapped with this particular one. However, as we focused on the curriculum specification, this was still of great benefit to our instructors and students.

We could not develop a storyline for all the historical events around the Yangtze Delta region as suggested by our colleague, but some of the events were linked up if they were related to one another in terms of causal relationship or historical figures.

Objectives 2 and 3 (on appreciation and identification of Chinese culture) could not be easily achieved by just having the students surfing once or twice on the website. However, one student, in an interview, expressed his interest in reading the materials presented and in watching the photos and video uploaded onto the site. He said he did not know how to appreciate the gardens in China, but after going through the detailed introduction on the design of traditional Chinese gardens, he was able to develop certain ability in appreciation.

Conclusion

During the process of developing the website, the instructors were able to look deeper into different issues of Chinese culture. The design of the package seems technical, but it is actually very intellectually stimulating. This was a good learning experience for the instructors as well as the students.

As for the latter, the package helped them develop a holistic picture of Chinese culture in a more interactive way, thus making learning more interesting and self-structured.

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