

Developing Teacher Autonomy and Reflective Practice through an Online Teacher Education Course

Gordon Joyes

University of Nottingham, UK

Zehang Chen

Beijing Normal University, China

This paper reports on research into the Chinese teacher experience of online learning. The context is the pilot units of an in-service “English Methodology” course in the BA degree program in education for English teachers in Chinese secondary schools. This was developed as part of a Chinese and UK government funded collaborative project from 2003 to 2005 by the University of Nottingham, UK and Beijing Normal University, China to develop innovative eLearning. The longitudinal evaluation involved a wide range of data collection methods including pre and post questionnaires, focus group interviews, online activity logs and tutor and learner diaries. Teacher reaction to the eLearning approach was very positive and the paper explores the key implications for eLearning design and implementation that arose.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese government has made English compulsory from grade three in primary school. There are a huge number of English teachers who need to be trained to obtain their BA degree. It is recognised that eLearning has a role

to play in meeting the growing demand for higher education in China and elsewhere. However, there is a deeply embedded perception within China that eLearning is somehow 'third rate' (Gu, 2003) below that of campus based and face to face distance courses and is mainly limited to continuing and adult education (Huang & Zhou, 2006).

It is important to be sceptical about claims of the value of eLearning. Learners quite naturally compare the online experience to a face to face one and not only can find it different, but to be of less value. It can be argued that if eLearning design is driven by user needs and pedagogy rather than the technology and notions of efficiency gains that can often predominate then it is likely to provide a quality learning experience. This notion formed the basis of the eLearning materials produced by the University of Nottingham, UK (UoN) and Beijing Normal University, China (BNU) as part of the Sino-UK funded *eChina-UK* programme.

The aim of the collaboration was to develop exemplar innovative eLearning materials for Secondary school teachers of English in China who had followed a 3 year training programme, but did not yet possess a BA, to form part of a BA 'top up' programme to be offered by BNU. Chinese teacher's experiences of working online to study units developed for the English Methodology course produced as a result of the collaboration are the focus of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diaz-Maggioli (2004) points out some constraints in current teachers professional development practices. He thinks current professional development rarely acknowledges teachers' own experiences and learning characteristics. The delivery modes of professional development lack variety and the opportunities for ordinary teachers to gain access are very limited. Web-based education provides teachers with a new and potentially more accessible mode of professional development that also has the potential for building an

online learning community of practitioners where teachers can share their thoughts and learn from each other. However, effective teacher training only comes out of careful design which is based on sound pedagogical perspectives.

The course discussed in this paper aims to support teacher autonomy and reflection and provide a motivating and visual learning experience for the teachers through an online learning community. The following considers the literature on teacher autonomy and reflection as well as the role of community in teacher development.

Teacher Autonomy

Much has been written about learner autonomy, but less on teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy has been defined as “teachers’ control over their own teaching” (Smith, 2000, p. 9). Little (1995, p. 179) describes autonomous teachers as:

having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploring the freedom that this confers.

In the case of teacher training, teachers are learners too. Therefore, teacher autonomy can be interpreted as teachers being responsible for their continuous learning in relation to their teaching. According to Dam (1995, p. 1),

learner autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person.

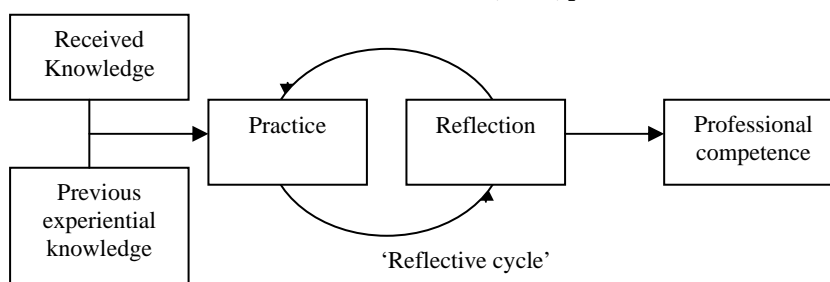
When teachers act as learners, this definition is also true. They learn better when they know their needs and purposes and are willing to take responsibility of their own learning. Teachers’ learning, obviously, is related to their teaching profession. A successful teacher training course should help

teachers to see the need to be trained and provide them opportunities to learn independently as well as cooperatively with other teachers. The purpose of teachers' learning is of course to promote better teaching. Therefore, the course design needed to enable teachers to see the relevance of what they are learning to what they do in their classrooms.

Teacher Reflection

Reflection has been highly emphasized in teacher education as a way to help teachers “connect experience and theoretical knowledge in order to use each area of expertise more effectively” (Knezevic & Scholl, 2002, p. 79). Richards (2005) defines reflection or “critical reflection” as an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action. Without reflection and critical thinking, teaching is guided largely by impulse, intuition, or routine (Richards, 1990). Wallace (1991) points out the importance of reflection in teacher's professional development. The following reflective model shows how teachers bring their previous experiential knowledge and received knowledge into practice and develop their professional competence by continuous reflecting upon and implementing new practice in their classroom.

FIGURE 1
Reflective Model (Wallace, 1991, p. 15)



Reflection should not only be important in teaching but also in teacher learning. In teacher education, reflection helps teachers to become autonomous learners as well as active practitioners. Through reflection, teachers monitor their own lesson planning, decide what actions to take on the spot in the classroom, and summarize lessons learned in the previous class. This helps them to improve their teaching and identify areas for improving their practice through further learning.

However, reflecting in isolation is not ideal - there is need for considering practice in relation to the practice of others and to theory. Blumenfeld et al. (2000, cited in Rasku-Puttonen et al, 2004, p. 49) emphasize that in order to implement a new curriculum which challenges previous practices,

teachers need time for planning, opportunities to reflect on their practice and occasions where they can share their experiences with their colleagues and create visions of what their classroom might be like when the innovation is in place. Teachers are unlikely to engage in professional development unless they foresee that the changes involved will lead to improvements in their classroom instruction and unless they are personally committed to implement the innovations.

In China, this is exactly what is happening at the moment. A new learner centered national curriculum is being introduced and teachers' previous beliefs and practices are being challenged. Helping teachers to reflect and share their reflections with other fellow teachers can be effective in improving their teaching.

Online Learning Community and Teacher Development

The Internet has enabled us to shorten the distance between people and broaden the idea of "community". According to Wenger (1998), members in a community are able to learn from each other by engaging in activities and discussions, sharing information and building relationships. People who work in the same place or visit the same website do not necessarily form a

community unless they interact and learn together. Expertise arises as a result of interaction and sharing in the network.

Rasku-Puttonen, et al (2004, p. 49) points out that

Innovative experiences shared by two teachers with different background knowledge bases are supposed to have a special role in challenging such collaborators to think critically about their previous skills and prior knowledge. It has been further suggested that an ICT-based environment provides a novel context for collaboration and the mutual exchange of experiences. We assume that such an environment promotes teachers' reflective awareness of their own practices.

Also because members in an online community can come from different schools or even regions, there is no direct competition among them, and therefore it might be easier for them to feel relaxed and be willing to expose 'themselves' more.

The above suggests that online teacher training courses, if carefully designed, can serve the purpose of supporting the development of autonomous and reflective teachers.

THE COURSE

The web-based English Methodology course is designed to train in-service teachers at BA level. There are four units in this course, the New National Curriculum of English in China, Language knowledge (teaching grammar, teaching vocabulary, teaching phonology), Language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), and Classroom management. Each unit is intended to be studied over 4 weeks and contains approximately 16 hours of work. In this pilot, two sections from each of the New National Curriculum and the Language Knowledge units were used by the participants. User needs carried out within the eChina-UK project at both Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) and BNU revealed that students wanted:

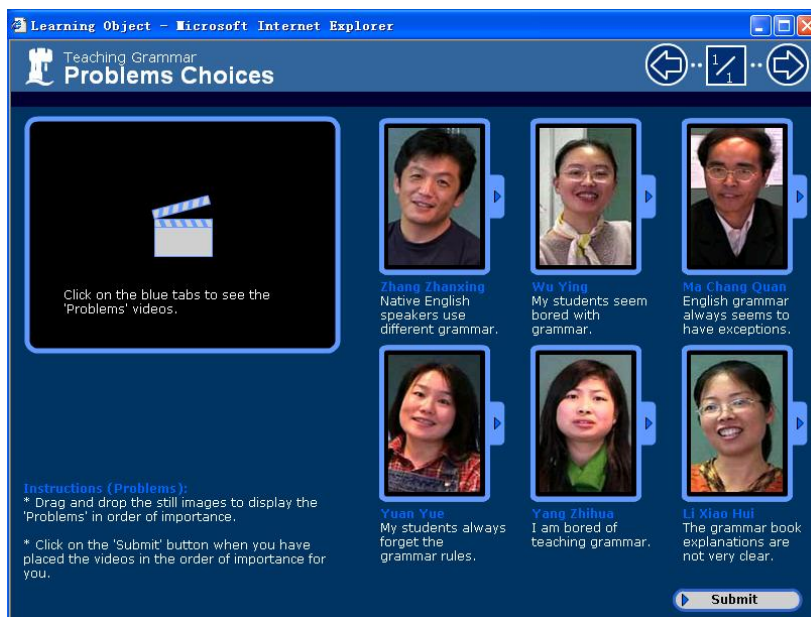
- Materials that related theory to practice;
- To be part of a learning community.

The course supports autonomy and reflection through the nature of the activities and through setting up a learning community. The following are some of the key pedagogic features of this course.

Relevance

As the literature review revealed there is a need for teachers to see the relevance of what they are learning to their daily professional lives in the classroom. The first unit was in fact highly related to Chinese teachers' professional lives at the time the pilot was conducted as training about the new curriculum formed an important part of teachers' continuing professional development. Textbooks referred to within the online course were carefully chosen and where possible were those in current use in classrooms. The Teaching Grammar materials within the units start with some Chinese teachers talking about their concerns and worries in their own classroom. Participants are asked to choose the problem they feel they want to deal with most to start their learning in this unit, see Figure 2. Their studies therefore start with relevant classroom problems that need a solution – practice is directly related to their classroom.

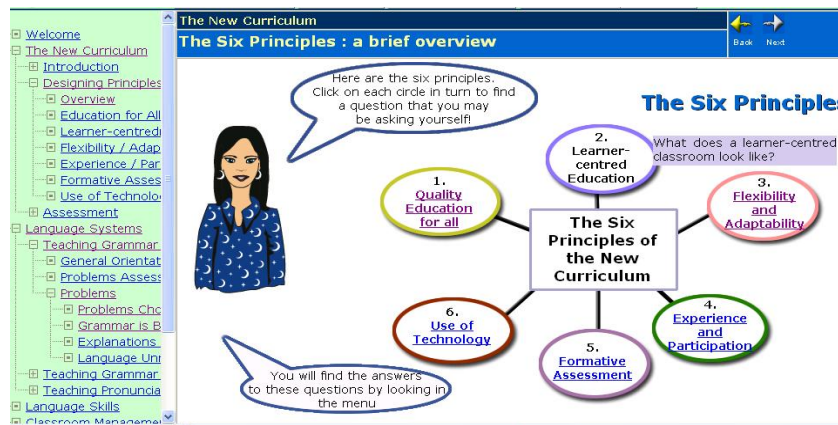
FIGURE 2
Problem Chooser



Supporting Autonomy

An element of choice in learning forms an important part of design and opportunities for the learners to choose their own order of learning are incorporated into the online course. The course navigation was designed to allow this and an example is shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3
Non-linear Presentation



Providing more resources is another way to promote autonomy. In the study guide, extra readings have been provided and there are many instances where learners are provided with opportunities to read in more depth about the topic. The use of reflective journals and discussion forum also help the teachers to be critical of what they know and what they are doing.

Supporting Reflection

Reflection is integrated into the online materials, see Figure 4. In the New Curriculum materials, they are asked to watch a video of a lesson and comment on it and discuss their opinions with other participants in a discussion group. They are encouraged to make notes online as well as write within their reflective journal and save these into their own Workspace to support further reflection. The Workspace is a learning tool designed for use within the course where learners can save their work and also decide whether to share these with others as well as offer feedback on shared work, see figure 5. In addition, in the Teaching Grammar materials, participants are asked to try one classroom game or activity with their own students, write some

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reflections on that lesson, share this on the bulletin board and then participate in an online discussion.

FIGURE 4
Reflection Task

The screenshot shows a web interface for 'The University of Nottingham' and 'Beijing Normal University'. The main content area is titled 'Language Systems' and 'Problems - Tasks'. It features an 'Assessment' section with a 'Reflection Task' graphic and a 'Questions' section with a list of seven questions. A left sidebar contains navigation links for 'THE NEW CURRICULUM', 'LANGUAGE SYSTEMS', and 'CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT'. A top navigation bar includes links like 'BA English Home', 'Workspace', 'Glossary', 'Library', 'Discussion Groups', 'Methodology', 'Notebook', 'Bibliography', 'Bulletin Board', and 'Tea House'.

Assessment

Use the notebook to answer the questions outlined below.

You can copy and paste this question list into your notebook.

Reflection Task

Questions

In order to complete the assessment for "Teaching Grammar", you must ensure that you have completed at least one of the classroom activities and their associated tasks. When you have completed this, answer the following questions:-

- What were the aims of your activity?
- Was the activity a success with your class? Why? Why not?
- Did the students enjoy it? How do you know?
- Did the students practise the grammar that you asked them to? Why? Why not?
- What other ideas do you have for using this activity?
- Would you use it again? Why? Why not?
- If yes, how often would you use it?

FIGURE 5
Workspace

The screenshot shows a digital workspace interface. On the left is a 'Personal Archive' panel with a 'Sort Files' section containing items like 'Problems Choices', 'My Audi...', 'My Notes 1', 'My Notes 2', 'My Bibliography', and 'My Refe...'. The main area is a 'Reflective Journal' window with a text input field and a 'save' button. The top navigation bar includes 'Personal Archive', 'POST', and 'Peer View' tabs, along with buttons for 'Select Unit', 'Unit...', 'Reflective Journal', 'Notebook', and 'Post to Tutor'.

Learning by Sharing

There were 3 communication tools used within the pilot.

- The bulletin board used for posting of items by students for sharing;
- The discussion groups used for asynchronous communication between learners and learners, and learners and the tutor, based around formal activities;
- The tea house used for synchronous informal chat.

Participating in the discussion forum, bulletin board and the tea house is not optional in the course; it is integrated into the learning. As discussed above, there are certain places in the course material that participants are required to share their thoughts and experiences with others in the discussion forum and/or the bulletin board. Learning from experts and learning from other teachers are both considered to be part of the learning process.

THE PILOT

The pilot was conducted in Beijing over 5 weeks. Twelve participants, all secondary school English teachers, volunteered to complete five weeks of online learning using the pilot materials and to conduct a group project in the last week. These online pilot materials included two weeks of introduction to the Chinese New National Curriculum of English and two weeks of work on Teaching Grammar. The open source Moodle¹ platform was used and the material was presented in English as the participants were English teachers. All of the participants completed the pilot which aimed to provide feedback to the developers of the methodology course in relation to its pedagogic design.

¹ Information about Moodle can be found at <http://moodle.com/>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this research was to examine how an on-line course could: scaffold teacher learning to develop their practical knowledge; challenge their practice through engaging in activities and tasks in a virtual community; support teacher autonomy.

In particular the research focused on the learner's experience of these new ways of working.

METHOD

The intention was to develop an understanding of the effectiveness of the learning materials through researching each learner's experience of the complete online learning environment in which they were expected to work. The aim was to illuminate (Parlett & Dearden, 1977) the learner experience through qualitative approaches supported by some quantitative instruments. In order to evaluate the whole learning experience in context, termed integrative evaluation (Draper et al, 1996), both paper instruments (e.g., questionnaires) to survey the whole group and observations with 6 cases and focus interviews were used in the research.

The researcher was a Chinese speaker who had a good understanding of the materials within the pilot having contributed to the development of some of them. She acted as the online tutor and was involved in the induction. This enabled her to 'indwell' easily and develop a rapport with the participants, who readily shared their concerns and experiences. This was helped by the fact that for the pilot there was no formal summative assessment, all assessment was viewed as formative and activities were ungraded. The tutor's role was therefore seen as supportive and non judgmental. This approach was seen as important for the evaluation of the pilot in which the level of complexity was high, i.e. innovative online learning delivered in China to inexperienced online learners on a new and untested platform,

demanding high levels of tutoring skills.

Subjects

Altogether there were twelve participants in this pilot and Table 1 contains their background information.

TABLE 1
Background Information of the Participants

Types of schools		Junior High Middle School: 10 Vocational School: 2				
Sex		Female: 11 Male: 1				
Years of being a teacher		6 years +: 8 3-5 years: 3 1-2 years: 1				
Participation of face-to-face teacher training		Yes: 7 No: 5				
Participation of web-based teacher training		Yes: 2 No: 10				
		Everyday	Most days	Once/twice a week	Rarely	Never
Computer skills	Word	1	3	7	1	
	Email	1	3	4	2	2
	Chat		2	2	2	6
	Discussion forum				7	5
	Browse information		6	3	3	
	Search for information		6	1	4	1

Eight of the subjects were experienced teachers, three had less experience and one was a novice teacher. Seven of them had participated in a face-to-face teacher training course (not including their diploma courses) and felt that was a positive experience, but concerns were expressed about the training venue being too far away. Only two of the participants had experience of a web-based training course, but both referred to a course to improve their English rather than teaching methodology. This was the first time for all of them to try a teaching methodology course online.

The teachers' Information Communication Technology (ICT) literacy levels are different. Four of them had high ICT Literacy, five were medium and three were low. Some of them used a computer everyday and some of them rarely or never used computers in their daily life. In the induction to the pilot, the trainers had to support these participants in developing the basic ICT skills, such as double clicking the mouse, creating a folder, making a USB connection, saving a file, using Word, etc.

Eight of these teachers had little or no experience of using chat rooms and none were experienced in using a discussion forum before the pilot. It was for this reason that hands on experience of using these online communication tools was included in the induction to the pilot.

Data Collection

A combination of research methods was used and these were:

1. Questionnaire: Several questionnaires were used in order to collect background information about the participants, their attitudes and concerns before and after the pilot, and their views about and experience of the course as well as their own generic skills in learning within a web-based course.
2. Focus group interview: Two focus group interviews were conducted, one in the middle and one at the end of the pilot in order to explore the student experience, gain their views on the pedagogic effectiveness of the eLearning approach and of the nature of the support.
3. Observations: Six representative participants, who varied in their teaching experience and ICT literacy, were selected and they came for observation to BNU once a week – 2 came on a Wednesday and 4 on a Thursday. They studied the online material in a computer room with the evaluator observing them and they discussed with each other their problems, the ways to solve them and what they were learning. They also shared their experience with the evaluator/tutor who recorded this in the tutor diary – see 6 below.
4. Online behaviour tracking of individual involvement with the learning

material: This included the use of the bulletin board, discussion forum, tea house, email between tutor-learners/learners-learners. This provided an indication of patterns of online behaviour.

5. Audio diary: Participants were asked to keep an audio diary during the process of learning. It was suggested that they record their feelings and thoughts about their online learning experience.

6. Tutor diary: The tutor kept a diary during the pilot and recorded the most significant moments and their reflections upon the experience. This provided a set of reflections of significant moments related to 2, 3, and 4.

The following table shows when these instruments were used during the pilot.

TABLE 2
Data Collection

Methods	Time			
	Beginning	Middle	End	
Questionnaires	Pre-pilot questionnaire	*		
	Background information	*		
	Generic skills	*	*	*
	Evaluation form	*	*	*
	Difficulties in learning online			*
	Post-pilot questionnaire			*
Focus group interview		*	*	
Observation	Once a week			
Online behaviour tracking	Duration of pilot			
Audio diary	Done by the participants at any time they wish			
Tutor's diary	When there were significant moments			

FINDINGS

This research uses as primary data the tutor diary as this provides reflections on significant moments in the pilot. These were also revealed through focus group interview, observations and tracking of online behaviour. The audio

diary transcripts were used to triangulate the significant issues that were identified through the tutor diary and were used to identify any additional issues. Questionnaire data was used in a similar way. In order to illuminate the learner experience extracts from learner narratives and the tutor diary are included in the following discussion of the research findings. More extensive analysis of the data will form part of ongoing doctoral research.

Overview

All 12 teachers in the pilot engaged with the materials over a period of 5 weeks, all completed the pilot programme – even though the pilot did not contribute to any recognized certificated programme and the pilot involved at least 4 hours of work per week on top of their normal full time teaching roles and their part time study at night schools every week. For ethical reasons, the names of these subjects used in this paper were anonymised by the authors.

There were 234 postings of information to the bulletin board and the discussion group over the 5 weeks from the 12 participants (not including induction or tutor postings). There were 24 Tea House chat sessions involving between 2 and 10 people at each session. The number of distinct visits to pages/activities/discussions etc in the materials for individual participants ranged from 647 to 2430. The average was 1412.

Every participant was asked to make an overall comment on their experience in the pilot at the end of the pilot. All 12 participants made comments that indicated that they were generally satisfied with the experience, the least positive were the low engagers. For 9 of them it was felt to be a very positive and unforgettable experience. The following are some of their comments:

“I feel very lucky to be able to participate in this pilot. I thought it would occupy too much of my spare time at the beginning so I was not that much keen in taking part in it. It was indeed time-consuming but now I feel my effort is rewarded. I got much more out of it than I put in.”

- Liang Wen

“There was so much to do in the pilot and I was very busy with all kinds of work everyday. It would have been easy for me to find an excuse and quit in the middle if I wanted. However, with the support and influence of my tutor, I had the courage to conquer any difficulty and now I’m glad I managed to stay till the end. Every time I went over the material, I had a deeper understanding and it enlightened my ideas to change my teaching.”

- Zhao Minqian

“This is the first time that I’ve tried web-based learning. Although I spent a lot of time and energy in it, I think it is absolutely worth my effort. I’ve learned so much, new words, new teaching methods, use of computer and Internet, etc. I’ve even formed the habit of using the Internet.”

- Zhan Xiaojing

Participants in general thought that they had not only learned some teaching principles and methods, but also had made some new friends and included the tutor amongst these. They particularly liked the opportunity to discuss issues about teaching with other teachers. They also found the pilot useful in the way that it had developed their ICT skills.

In Depth Analysis

1) Autonomy

As stated earlier, the course emphasizes autonomy by offering teachers some choice in their study approaches. Observation of the six selected participants shows that they all took advantage of this, but in different ways. Two browsed the materials first so that they had a general idea of what the course offered.

“I would browse first and get a general idea of the content and the arrangement. I would then copy down the tasks so that I have a purpose for learning. Finally I would start from the beginning and learn the material bit by bit.”

- Wen Zhang

“I normally browse first and pick up the things that interest me and learn these first. Sometimes I would browse first and learn in details.”

– Zhao Minqian

Four would simply study the materials in the order they were presented because they did not want to miss any information. However, they would tend to revisit the materials and concentrate on the things they were interested in.

“I won’t select things to learn for the first time because I don’t want to miss anything. I’ll probably choose things to look at from the second time.”

– Xie Zhexiang

“I like to be given choices. I can learn what I’m interested first so that I feel very free.”

– Liu Lianxi

However, two of the 12 participants found it hard to cope because there was too much choice. They prefer linearly presented materials. Five participants mentioned that they are very passive in learning in general so they need some pressure from outside to push them to learn.

“I still want the course writers to give us certain pressure in learning. If you do not leave enough tasks and homework, I won’t learn anything more apart from the minimum requirement especially when I’m busy.”

– Wen Zhang

“I’m a very passive person. I need pressure to force me to learn. I’m accustomed to being forced to learn.”

– Zhao Minqian

“I want to be guided by experts. I can try things out and I have my own thoughts but I do need them to offer me feedback so that I feel relieved. I’m not an active person who takes initiatives to do things if not asked to.”

–Liu Lianxi

Apparently for some learners, autonomy may not develop naturally. Teacher learners do need time and guidance to get used to taking charge of their own learning.

2) Reflection

In this course, reflection is not optional; instead it is woven into the course material. After a short period, teachers not only reflected on the things they did in this course, but also things they did in their classroom. After Zhao Minqian watched the video of a learner-centered class and went through the materials, she began to look at her practice critically. She said her teaching was successful but she couldn't say the learning was a happy experience for her students and she didn't enjoy such teaching either. She was inspired by the course and others' practice and began to try something different. She trusted her students more and helped them to take charge of their own study.

“Now I feel I should try to change myself. I didn't leave any homework in the past two weeks and changed my way of motivating them. I praised them for any progress they made and I allowed them to be tested in different content. Those who can't read well can choose to be tested on reading and those who can't write well can choose to be tested on spelling. My students really accept this change and do learn even if there is no homework. I feel very happy for them and for myself.”
– Zhao Minqian

She also pointed out that online learning made her think about what she had learned and what she was doing in her classroom – in fact her whole approach to teaching.

“I can't stop thinking about it because it's not a 45-minute lesson. I have to think about it all month.”
– Zhao Minqian

The pilot seemed to encourage these teachers to reflect on and change their teaching practice – a key indicator of learning. Although five weeks was not long enough for these teachers to become true reflective practitioners, they

seem to have started their journey.

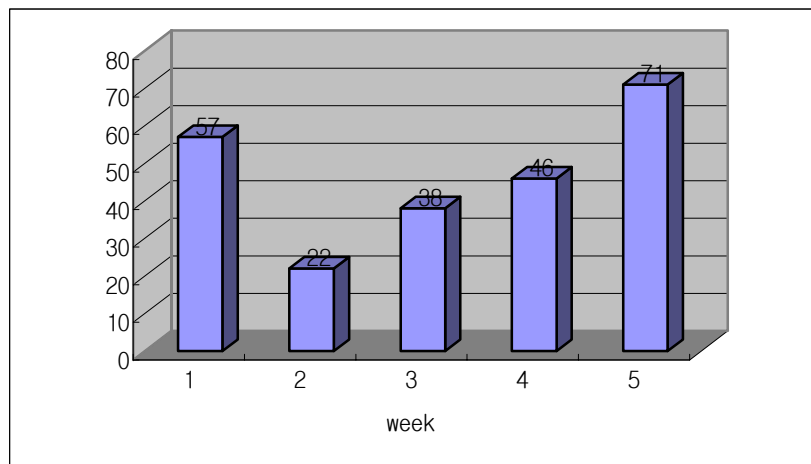
3) Learning by sharing

The use of the discussion forum and chat room was new to most of the participants as indicated by the results from the pre-pilot questionnaire (Table 1). The sense of community as evidenced by social as well as course activity based actions did not establish itself immediately but took three weeks to form. This time period is typical for those online courses that successfully establish online communities of learners. Participants were not used to these online communication tools at the beginning of the pilot. However, with the tutor's support, participants started to use them more and more. Table 3 and figure 6 show the contributions to the discussion forum:

TABLE 3
Individual Contributions to the Discussion Group

	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	Total
Liang Wen	9	9	4	10	5	37
Peng Yuanxia	3	2	9	5	17	36
Xie Zhexiang	5	4	3	1	18	31
Zhan Xiaojing	10	3	2	4	3	22
Xian Feng	3	1	3	7	7	21
Wen Zhang	8	0	3	7	1	19
Liu Lianxi	1	0	6	5	3	15
Li Shaoqian	5	1	1	1	7	15
Zhao Minqian	3	2	2	0	6	13
Man Jingxiu	5	0	2	3	1	11
Zhao Ling	3	0	1	2	2	8
Xie Yang	2	0	2	1	1	6
Total	57	22	38	46	71	234

FIGURE 6
Total Contributions in Each Week



Participant engagement in the online discussion was highest in the last three weeks. The number of messages in the first two weeks occupied 33.8% of the total messages. A content analysis of the discussion forum postings indicated that in the first two weeks the topics were mainly related to seeking support for computer skills and enquiring about course requirements. However, in the last three weeks, participants were initiating issues, offering help, discussing and sharing problems and carrying out group projects. Participants felt closer and closer to each other and they began to care about each other and share interesting things with each other. This clearly helped them to learn effectively and communicate more with each other. Participants felt they were part of a small society. Some of them became so addicted to this by the end of the pilot that they did not want to stop, so the website was left open after the pilot. Discussions still happened over a month.

"I had never used the Internet before the pilot and I had never chatted with others. Now I'm really enjoying this way of learning. I feel so good when I'm communicating with my tutor and others in the discussion forum and

the Tea House.”

- Peng Yuanxia

“I had no experience of chatting online. Now I have the experience because of this pilot. I feel really good about this.”

- Zhao Minqian

In a web-based teacher training course, communication tools are important for teacher development as they can share good experiences and help to solve each others’ problems in teaching. Some participants said they would have talked more if the topics were about specific issues. Many of the topics in the materials were felt to be too general for them. They wanted to discuss specific teaching skills such as how to teach specific grammar rules, how to teach a certain lesson, etc. What’s more, three of the participants expressed lack of confidence in their abilities as a group of practitioners and this affected their attitude in contribution to discussions. They felt only real experts could find solutions for them.

“I don’t think we as ordinary teachers have the ability to discuss about teaching methods. I prefer to have some excellent teachers to show us how they teach certain lessons or language points so that we can learn from them.”

- Zhao Ling

“I’d rather have some experts to comment on my report of my lesson or my other experience. This can help me better because they’ll point out the space for improvement.”

- Liu Lianxi

“We as teachers are facing the similar problems but who can tell us the manageable solutions? I think Chinese experts can help. We don’t have good solutions.”

- Xie Zhexiang

This indicates that these teachers needed guidance and support before they could begin to become autonomous learners and teachers. Teacher autonomy does not come naturally if learners lack confidence.

The following stories of individuals help illuminate the changes in attitude to the discussion forum and their community over the period of the pilot.

Liang Wen's story:

Beginning

Liang Wen was one of the most active users of discussion forum, however, at the beginning, she said

“Sometimes I want to say a bit more in the forum but I realize it takes me too much time. Sometimes I feel very tired after teaching whole day and I don't want to think about teaching any more, so I don't want to discuss with others in the forum. I don't want to answer their questions and I don't want to raise my question in study.” (30/03/05)

When she had different opinions with what is introduced in the content, she would normally think it over in her mind and summarize it in her notes but not necessarily go to the discussion forum. She thought it was because she was lack of awareness of using the discussion forum.

Middle

Since she wouldn't automatically think of using it as a place for communication with others, she told herself to post her questions on the discussion forum whenever possible during this period.

“I think it is simply a question of habit. Once the habit is formed, it would be very natural to use it.” (06/04/05)

End

At the end of the pilot, she said she would always visit the discussion forum first when she logged in because she wanted to see what others were talking about. She also formed a habit of raising any questions she had in the forum.

“I think it's a matter of time and awareness. I'm getting more and more concerned about what others are discussing about. Discussion helps me in learning because some of the points raised by others are ignored by me.”

(20/04/05)

She also thought that creating a relaxing environment for using the forum was important.

“I feel that the atmosphere of our discussion is really relaxing and you don’t need to worry whether there are mistakes in your postings. I don’t feel any pressure and I’m not nervous about what I say in the forum.”
(20/04/05)

Xian Feng’s story:

Beginning

Xian Feng had very limited knowledge of using the internet and she didn’t even have an email address. The asynchronous communication mode annoyed her very much at the beginning.

“We log in at different time so there is always a time difference. Sometimes I had to wait for one day to get any replies to my postings. Maybe it’s because we are still not familiar with this way of learning.”
(31/03/05)

Middle

In the middle of the study, she still preferred face-to-face communication because

“In the discussion forum, you just can’t communicate immediately and you have to wait for replies.” (07/04/05)

However, she said

“When I come across questions, I’d like to ask others first in the discussion forum before trying other methods.” (07/04/05)

End

In the end, she became very motivated in using the discussion forum because

“I want to see whether others have replied my postings. I feel very happy here. It’s getting more and more interesting in the last two weeks. We started talking about our problems in teaching, which is very nice.”
(21/04/05)

She thought:

“the discussion forum is much better than the beginning. Once you are familiar with it, you want to use it all the time. The more you use it, the more interested you are. I now go to the discussion forum first every time I log in, and I’ll put up postings about anything I’m interested in.”
(21/04/05)

Building up the sense of community not only took time but also required everybody’s deliberate contribution. Neither Liang Wen nor Xian Feng automatically became frequent users of the discussion forum. They had their doubts and confusions at the beginning. Their efforts in trying out this new way of working apparently paid off. In the end both enjoyed the experience and learned actively by discussing with the other participants. This virtual community had become an important in supporting their professional development.

CONCLUSION

Not surprisingly the research found that learners need time to make the transition to the new ways of working involved in online learning. The research provides an insight into the ways, with effective support, this growing familiarity with the tools for learning affects the learner’s attitudes to online study – from a rather negative to a positive one.

It appears that for these Chinese teacher learners the carefully designed

materials did foster learner autonomy (though for some this was problematic) and reflection upon practice – the relevance of the materials to their classroom experience was instrumental in that this meant that they could consider the implications of their studies for their own classrooms. In addition the relative safety of working within an enclosed and supported online community helped these Chinese teachers to critique established practice.

The following represent suggestions that arise from this study to guide future online developments and for further research:

- Participants need guidance and support regarding the strategies they can adopt in e-learning. Learners need to be trained in how to become more efficient e-learners. Ideally those beginning to work online on a course need a period of induction which gradually introduces them to the nature of the student and tutor role and provides opportunities for them to develop confidence in using the new technologies employed as well as gradually building a sense of community. It was not possible to carry out this planned approach to induction for the pilot but interestingly it appears that the first few weeks acted as an induction itself, with participants interacting with each other regularly at the end of this period. However engagement with the content during the pilot was made more difficult because of this factor.
- Full consideration should be given to teacher learners' language proficiency, computer skills, mixed levels of students, strict exam system, heavy workload of teachers and students, etc.
- The amount of material covered needs to be considered carefully if active engagement is expected as developing understanding takes time.
- Materials should be tailored to meet the needs of Chinese teachers. The fact that materials were designed to be relevant to classroom practice was important. For example, specific discussions and practical classroom tasks were appreciated. There is a need for less general discussion and more readily manageable classroom tasks and demo lessons as well as the more complex ones.
- The tutor is a key element in the learning process and selection and training needs to be considered. An adequate level of content and pedagogic knowledge as well as ICT literacy is essential. Experiential training needs to be provided to ensure tutors develop confidence and

expertise with the learning environment and their role within it in supporting the development of a learning community, by facilitating learning activities and promoting interaction between learners in the discussion forum.

THE AUTHORS

Gordon Joyes is Associate Professor in eLearning in the School of Education, University of Nottingham, UK. His current research is in the use of new learning technologies in Higher Education and he has been involved in a wide range of projects in this area as a project director, manager and researcher. Relevant publications are *Personalised Online Learning: Exploiting New Learning Technologies* and *A generic framework for the training of eLearning tutors both in H. Spencer-Oatey (In press) eLearning in China: eChina Perspectives on Policy, Pedagogy and Innovation, HK Research.*

Zehang Chen is a lecturer in the School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Beijing Normal University, China. Her current research interests cover ELT, eLearning and teacher education. Her recent publications include *The influence of Chinese culture on trainees' online behaviours in a teacher training course.* (2006). Networked learning conference proceeding. Lancaster and *A participatory design approach to the development of online tutor training materials - A case study from China* (2006) ASCILITE (Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education) conference proceeding.

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