Bridging The Cultural Divide

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Background and rationale

The motivation for this project grew from discussions between a group of lecturers from across the university during and post delivery of subject specific bridging courses at North East Normal University in Changchun, China during March 2003. Anecdotal and experiential evidence suggested that there was a common need for study skills development amongst our prospective Chinese students, in order to better prepare them for the more open and self-directed style of learning expected of students at the University of Wolverhampton. Prospective students attending the bridging course presented a significant demand for more detailed information about the university and its teaching methods as well as information about the local area, living expenses etc.

The main aim of the project was to investigate the learning styles, experiences and needs of prospective Chinese undergraduates to direct entry at Level 3 of a variety of study programmes and, in response to the findings, develop some inter-school learning materials to support Chinese students. Thus it was hoped to avoid unnecessary duplication and the need for large teaching teams to travel yearly to China to deliver bridging courses. It was intended that the resources developed would promote an awareness of teaching and learning methodologies in general use across the university. The particular resources to be modified were initially drawn from a range of generic and study skills disciplines and essential or fundamental subject specific learning outcomes as identified by Bridging Course colleagues from several Schools across the university.

Many Chinese students at the time of Bridging Courses and on arrival to the UK may not yet have achieved grade 6.0 in their I.E.L.T.S test and so may not be suited to the language level required of Level 3 programmes, which is another key reason for orientating some of the materials to a lower level.

The innovation

The innovation has been two-fold. Firstly, it brought together and facilitated the involvement of Chinese students in the development of a learning resource to support their needs and the anticipated needs of prospective Chinese students. The mechanism for this involvement was bi-monthly group meetings/workshops of Chinese students facilitated by a personal academic tutor.

The workshops led to an information gathering exercise involving the design, dissemination and collation of a simple questionnaire to prospective students, and the gathering on video of informal interviews to elicit students' expectations and experience both prior to joining the University of Wolverhampton and during the first year of study.

Reflection upon the findings of this initial research stage has led to the development of a PowerPoint prototype of a web site for use by Chinese direct entrants to Level 3 programs of study in Video and also in Life Sciences. The web pages include photographs and witness testimony in the form of video and audio clips to support the factual information normally conveyed in booklets which can be accessed once in the UK. Useful links are provided to existing university websites including services, subjects and school home pages. There are pages of information about central university services and schools. The information is drawn from the booklet 'University of Wolverhampton. Postgraduate, Professional and

Research Opportunities. 2003-2004'. The inclusion of Mandarin video and audio clips recognizes that many of our Chinese students arrive at the university without the prerequisite IELTS 6.0 standard and so may find English comprehension difficult.

Pages provide information specific to direct entry to Level 3 study. Case studies are used to illustrate the typical experience of Chinese students at the university. Pages also provide an opportunity for students to practice short subject specific exercises and make contact with subject tutors.

The outcomes

Initial research began with the facilitation of regular group work sessions with Chinese students (three Video MA and two Video undergraduates). Facilitated discussions encouraged students to explore their own experience of studying here and coping with cultural, social and study differences. Questions and interview approaches were developed during the group sessions and used to inform the gathering of anecdotal information from other Chinese students across the university to support the direction of the project and to help to justify and or suggest particular materials and methodologies that could be employed in the resource.

Chinese students canvassed during the bridging course and their first year of study at University of Wolverhampton described their previous learning approach as being dominated by learning by rote, with a limited amount of self-directed study and practical. Experiential and group study was particularly unfamiliar to the group canvassed. Once following a study programme at the university these same students and their peers reported limited prior experience of problem analysis and problem solving. They were particularly concerned about their lack of familiarity with learning centre procedures and the quality and amount of written work expected on programmes.

On a return visit to China over the winter break, Chen Lei was able to distribute questionnaires to some 200 students at NENU from the schools of Computing and Broadcasting (two of the five subjects intended to be introduced in our web pages). 155 (75%) questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire was distributed in Chinese. It was not surprising to find that Broadcasting and Journalism students placed the influence of media-generated league tables highly. Interestingly, the choice of subjects and the teaching and learning environment also scored highly as first considerations for overseas study.

An important function of the questionnaire was to determine the preferred methods of receiving information and learning materials. The initial intention was to produce a CD Rom or DVD of learning materials that could be contained and would not require the team to have to rapidly learn a deep level of web design skills. The findings, together with discussions and attendance at Netskills training on evaluating and designing e-learning, led the team down a new avenue and the inherent flexibility, trackability and ease of updating that the web affords was becoming increasingly attractive. It was important therefore to find out if this method of distribution was a possibility in terms of Chinese student access. Would students have access to their own PC with a DVD or CD drive? Would they have access to the Internet? Could we link up with a lecturer who might support a pilot run of the project or dissemination of questionnaires? The survey unearthed some useful responses. The preferred method was indeed Internet based. A key finding of our initial research was that personal testimony from Chinese students (NENU graduates) was highly valued and would be a significant determining influence upon their choice of overseas university study. The Chinese (Mandarin) translations included in the resource and basic information is intended to be an introduction; a first opportunity to access information about the university and the potential courses offered by it.

The original target group for the pilot was undergraduate students at NENU (hence the use of Mandarin rather than Cantonese). This has been revised to Mandarin-speaking Chinese students engaged in the English summer school programmes here at the University

of Wolverhampton. Canvassing student feedback to the pilot pages should be more practical by virtue of their proximity and any modifications they suggest can be implemented and tested with relative ease. It is likely that the pilot will take the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which will allow some testing of the navigation and assets.

The original scope of this project to include contributions from five Schools has proven too wide. A great deal of time was spent canvassing Chinese students for their experience and to identify their needs, which has meant that design and production has been concentrated into a very short period. There are still a few sample exercises to be incorporated for Video and Bio Sciences. Summer 2004, prior to the pilot, will see the testing of video streaming and the modification of files into suitable web format. The framework for the site is now in place and in the spirit of continued and further interschool dialogue and co-operation it is still hoped that the original partners from schools will be able to provide some materials for inclusion in the site when it finally goes 'live'. The team would also welcome any new partners wishing to make a first contact with NENU students via this project.

Benefits

Engaging Chinese video students in the development of the project enabled the project team a greater degree of access to the wider population of Chinese students throughout this university and North East Normal University where we distributed some 200 questionnaires. The Chinese students' social connections helped greatly, as did their exposure to new Chinese peers who studied alongside them and also on the MA taught modules. In addition to collating information from 155 returned questionnaires, we have gathered video testimony from Chinese students in both Mandarin and English.

The readability of the English and the inclusion of audio help/translation files in Mandarin greatly enhance the usability of the web site for Chinese students who are still developing their English language skills. The information can be accessed by individuals or groups, and if necessary used during tutorials. This may prove particularly useful during induction. The web accessibility of the information provided ensures that students can access the information the minute they arrive on campus and revisit it as necessary and as often as they wish. They have the reassurance of familiar voices and faces. The fact that the pages are web based ensures that we can update them regularly and monitor their use. This mechanism will be put in place during the embedding period.

Autonomous access to the resource by Chinese students seeking answers to oft repeated questions and an opportunity to practice some of the learning approaches used in a given subject has the benefit of both encouraging empowerment of the individual and saving tutor time in repeating and or tracking down information for each individual request. The length and depth of bridging courses and the number of staff required to deliver them might be lessened, since some of the information and experiences that would otherwise be gained on the bridging course will have been facilitated by the resource.

The design layout and simple navigation within the site makes it fairly simple to add additional pages and manage increased navigational and interactive elements. Subject resources can easily be adapted to the framework.

Students involved in the development of the resource have found the experience rewarding. It has clearly enhanced their study experience here at University of Wolverhampton and enabled them to form a strong support network of peers supported by a solid academic relationship with subject staff.

Future developments

It is intended that the resources will be used by Chinese students during the end of their EPY/Summer school period and at the beginning of the induction process. A group of students will be selected from the disciplines of Life sciences and Video/Digital Media.

During the pre-semester preparation window additional learning materials will be prepared to further enhance the experience of Video students and the resources will be shared with WBS staff and learning support staff in the School of Art and Design in an attempt to broaden their scope and find new partners wishing to add subject-specific pages to this framework. It is hoped that original partners will be re-energised after seeing a working model and thereby better able to vision the potential content for their subject on the site.

A forum/chat facility will be added to the site following the initial tutor supported review /pilot stage. A mechanism for monitoring access and eliciting feedback will be developed. The intention is to use the resources primarily in place of, or supplementary to, bridging courses and secondarily during ongoing induction for Level 3 direct entrants and Level 1entrants for the first year of their study.

The initial PowerPoint pilot has been disseminated amongst the academic team delivering the video pathway. Initial responses have been favourable and further links to video modules and sample exercises are planned. A brief project review will be disseminated to Digital Media staff following the initial induction period (first six weeks in Semester One) after which it is hoped that generic digital media information can be prepared and added to the site. Word of mouth should serve to spread the usefulness of the resources and encouragement to share experiences will be inserted at appropriate junctures in the resource.

A further development is likely to include some additional pages for Deaf students. The pages will be enhanced by the inclusion of BSL written translations and 'signed' video clips as well as some case studies of former Deaf students. The intention is not to provide separatist resources for specific groups of students, but to develop targeted needs-responsive resources to which mainstream resources can ultimately be added or to which all students can have access.

Acknowledgements

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