Progress and Challenges for E-learning in China

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The E-learning in China was initiated by the central government in 1998 and its scale has been growing very fast. This paper is going to analyze the progress and challenges of E-learning in an objective manner. The paper includes four parts. In the first part the author will describe the three main kind of application for E-learning in China. In the second part the author will summarize four valuable innovations made by E-learning. In the third part the author will analyze five challenges for E-learning in China. In the forth part the author will classify six categories of research topics which will enhance the E-learning in China in the future. The author hopes this paper will help reader to get deep understanding on E-learning in China.

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Three Kinds of Application for E-learning in China

Now E-learning is one of the most prosperous fields in Education in China even in the world. In 1999, the central government announced *Nation Education Plan for 21 Century*, in which a new term, Modern Distance Education appeared at first time. It means Distance Education by ICT (Ministry of Education, 1999). Because the conception of Modern Distance Education is as same as E-learning in the other countries, I prefer to take term E-learning instead of Modern Distance Education. However if you try to find more literature in Chinese on E-learning, please use Modern Distance Education in Chinese as key word instead of E-learning in literature searching. Otherwise you'll fail to find much enough valuable information because in China we have different concept system. Anyway in this paper, I adopt international concept system about Distance Education. So, E-learning is as same as Modern Distance Education in China.

Because E-learning is more interactive than other distance education solutions, more and more education program or institutions adopt E-learning as main solution for serving quality education to more people, or to the very rural areas. More and more people select E-learning as while as more and more people in China can have access to Internet by different kind of networks, such as wireless network, CERNET, public internet etc. E-learning has too many

applications in different levels and different programs so that people can not understand what it means exactly. It seems that E-learning has become a broader and broader concept. So it is very necessary to summarize the main application forms on E-learning in China. It will help readers to understand the overall situation on E-learning in China and to avoid confusion on context of E-learning in China.

In summary currently E-learning has three main kind of applications s in China. E-learning plays different role in different applications. In the first kind of application, E-learning is a bridge to transfer quality courses and learning resources to more students, particularly to disadvantaged people. For example, government initiated, *E-learning Project for School in Rural Area*, which aimed to deliver quality learning resources to rural area for enhancing education by E-learning. In this kind of application context, E-learning focuses more on media and technology than teaching & learning. In the second kind of application, E-learning is a kind of teaching & learning model, which is integrated into classrooms as part of blended learning in conventional universities and schools. E-learning is highly commented as a way to transfer traditional lecture into blended learning in conventional universities and schools. In this kind of application context, E-learning focuses on learning resources, and teaching & learning. In the third kind of application, E-learning is a kind of separate institution or university, which is only serving off-campus students via ICT. For example, there are 67 online institutions under conventional universities are only serving off-campus student with online degree program in China. There are many online schools to supply online programs to students for their spare time after school. There are many institutions in the big companies in China, which support staff professional development by E-learning. In the third application context, E-learning focuses not only teaching & learning, but also system management.

It is apparent that in China concept E-learning means three kinds of conception based on three kinds of application. It means in China E-learning is different from second generation of Distance Education because E-learning can not only enlarge scale of Education, but also pushing transformation of conventional education. It means E-learning has become core part of Education system instead of edge part of education system. Anyway, when some one mentions E-learning, you'd better confirm which application he means or all three kinds of application. In this paper, E-learning means all three kinds of application.

Four Innovations on E-learning in China

In summary, E-learning in China has made four main innovations which are significant progress compared with second generation of Distance Education. The innovations are solid foundation for fast development of E-learning and are valuable experiences for further development of E-learning in China.

Innovation about New Learning Environment

Internet can supply not only a media for education information, but also online social community, which is a basis condition for interaction between teacher-student & student-student. So far almost every E-learning institution has built online learning community for supporting

social interaction .In fact online learning community is an essential component for E-learning system. The man functions for online learning environment generally include following three sub-systems, learning resource management sub-system (RMS), learning management sub-system (LMS), and teaching management sub-system (TMS). Although it has taken several years for E-learning institutions to establish and improve their online learning community, so far, most institutions have well-functions and adaptive online learning community.

Innovation on Learning Model

In the first and second generation of distance education, the main learning model is self study or class-based learning with printed materials or TV education program. The students were very independent on lecture by face to face or TV. In the E-learning, more and more self-regulated learning activities are conducted by distributed learners in online learning community. Simultaneity interactive learning between teacher-student & student-student by online learning community is more and more active. Students can get flexibility on time and space from self-regulated learning. Students can be more motivated and supported by interactive learning. However new leaning models require new teaching and supporting strategies.

Innovation on Organizations

In the first and second generation, distance education program was mainly delivered by separate distance education institutions, such as correspondent colleges, or radio and TV universities. They are separate from conventional universities and are the edge of public education system. Since 1998, more and more conventional schools and conventional universities started to integrate E-learning to their teaching & learning either for in-campus students or off-campus students. Many conventional schools and universities set up online schools or online colleges, which are mainly responsible for E-learning. More and more big companies set up division, which are mainly responsible for staff professional development by E-learning. Almost every conventional education institution is involved in E-learning in different degree. Even many companies invested on E-learning and are deep involved in E-learning. In fact because distance education is a kind of industry education, the management experience from company investors is very valuable and effective for E-learning. It is a pilot in China that private companies are allowed to be involved in Education by invest.

Innovation on Learning Support System

As we know learning centers are very important part of distance education system. In the first and second generation of distance education, every institution set up its own learning centers by collaboration with local institutions or setting up local affiliated learning center. As for E-learning in high education, at beginning the central government published a strict policy that E-learning institutions are prohibited to set up local affiliated learning centers and E-learning institutions had to collaborate with local institutions as partners. Comparatively E-learning in school level and staff training is more flexible to set up their learning support system. In fact, the support from learning centers is unqualified with high demands on learning support as along with the student number fast development. The institutions can not direct manage learning centers. It used to be the toughest problem for most E-learning institutions in China.

For solving this dilemma, in 2001 central government approved and consigned Central Radio and TV University (CCRTV) to sep up a public learning support system which would serving all institutions. Public learning support system take responsibilities of recruiting students, learning management & examination management by managing learning centers all over the countries. E-learning institutions take responsible for developing programs & courses, and tutorial by online community. In this innovative way, institutions do not have to manage learning centers directly and students can find possible program by logging in one web. It was proved that public learning support system effectively enhanced learning support for E-learning. More and more E-learning institutions prefer to collaborate with public learning support system rather than to collaborate with local educational institutions. So far central government has approved three public learning support systems.

Five Challenges for E-learning in China

Although E-learning has made great progress in China so far, it is still facing many challenges from internal and external. They reflect in different concepts, no action plan, confusion on quality perception, traditional teaching and learning pedagogy, and expensive media solution.

Different Concepts

In E-learning, there are several new terms, such as Modern Distance Education, which appeared in the government document at the beginning and is very popular and widely used in practice & papers in distance education at high education level in China now. However it is not international so that it is very confusing for foreigners. The wrong concept prevents international communication & international understanding between China and other countries. Even in China, people use different term in different level E-learning. The concept E-learning is only used in staff professional development by distance education. The concept Modern Distance Education is only used in distance education on high education by. The concept Online Education is only used in distance education in school level. Difference on concepts prevents conversation between distance education institutions in different levels. It is very necessary to have a common concept to describe same practice, which should be international.

No Action Plan for E-learning

So far there is no national action plan on E-learning. The central government initiated Modern Distance Education Project in 1998 and so far has approved 68 universities to deliver degree program by ICT. That is a plan for E-learning in High Education. So far no any plan from government has been published for E-learning in school level and no degree program level. E-learning in school is developing without any monitor, guide, and management; even without support from government, So E-learning in school level is like a private business more than a school in some way. E-learning in different level is isolated each other, no any connection and support. This situation is not good for constructing life-long learning society by E-learning.

Confusion on Quality Perception

In China the quality reputation for E-learning is still very low although its flexibility on space & time is very welcome by potential learners. All E-learning institutions are making their efforts on improving quality. However some of them selected to copy programs from conventional universities in order to prove their good quality. In fact they failed to get better reputation. The programs copied from conventional university were not suitable adult learner and online learning. They were very puzzled on the disappointing result. Then they started to try to develop program suitable for adult learner & online learning. However they are not confident on the result on reputation. It implies that most practitioners have no clear quality perception. From a survey, Baibin found some practitioners think E-learning has to follow quality standard of conventional university for good quality and same reputation and the others think E-learning should have its own quality standard (Baibin, 2010). It indicates that the quality perception on E-learning is confused in China now. This confusion inevitably results in confusion on quality standards and judgment. It is partly because so far there is no guide from government on quality assurance for E-learning.

Traditional Teaching & Learning Pedagogy

Although E-learning has undergone for more than 12 years, the teaching & learning pedagogy is still very traditional. Video lecture is main teaching activity and receiving is main learning activity. Few programs and courses integrate other kind of activities so that distance learners often complain the monotonous & boring learning. It is partly because of teacher-center education tradition and partly because we do not have many enough qualified instructional designer. That will be a long way to explore innovative pedagogy for E-learning and spread the effective pedagogy to all programs in China.

Expensive Media Solution

Although E-learning has many advantages, it requests distance learner has computer and can have access to internet. Although now in China internet has covered most places even villages, many farmers have no computer and can not afford the internet access fee. They need much cheaper learning opportunity such as video, audio & printed material. However except online programs, few program and courses supply other optional media solutions now. This expensive media solution is not suitable for unbalanced situation on economy in China between city and village.

Six Trends Towards E-learning in China

Forwards to the future development, we can keep working on the following six fields for improving E-learning in China.

Transfer Education Perception

E-learning towards to adult learner is different from conventional education. So we have to

transfer our education perception from teacher-center to learner–center. In fact now teacher-center pedagogy is still dominating education, even E-learning in China. In traditional education model, learning means listening and accepting. Students are very passive and not motivated very well although teachers always try to encourage students. In order to supply quality education to adult learner by E-learning, we have to adopt student-center pedagogy and learn how to support self-guided learning. So I think we have to change E-learning management system in China, even evaluation method as well.

Explore on New Teaching & Learning Pedagogy

With learner-center perception, we have to explore on suitable teaching & learning pedagogy for Chinese context. We should pay more attention on instructional design and design learning activity, instead of teaching activity although we still high recognize the importance of teachers in E-learning. We have to explore on effective experience for learner-center learning support activity. Tutors should learn how to facilitate student's learning instead of simply lecture to students. It is a long way for us to get effective and adaptive pedagogy for E-learning.

Develop Theory on E-learning

It is proved that the theory on distance education for first & second generation can't guide E-learning practice now very well. The theory on E-learning is much demanded now. There are many theoretic issues we have to solve for effective practice of E-learning. For example, we have to use a common & international concept system to describe our E-learning practice so that we can share experience each other & with E-learning people from other countries. We have to develop theory on interaction to guide effective interaction between teacher-students and between students. We have to enclose the economy principle of E-learning. Anyway innovation on theory is important and urgent for E-learning in China.

Innovate National Management System

In order to improve E-learning in China, we have to make a national action pan as a guide for all kind of and all level of E-learning. Government should invest fund to E-learning for public education so that E-learning can enhance education equity. Otherwise E-learning only delivered by private company will make the education gap between advantage class and disadvantage class bigger and bigger. In order to improve E-learning quality, it is necessary to publish a national educational quality guide for E-learning, which is very common in other countries. I believe that National educational quality guide will enhance education quality for E-learning in China.

Integrate Intelligent, Social Network and Mobile Technology into E-learning

New technology is supplying more and more potential for E-learning. Intelligent technology can make E-learning to supply individualized support functions to satisfied personal needs. Social Network Technology can enhance online interaction between teacher-student & students, which is very important for distributed learners. Mobile technology can make E-learning more flexible on time and space. We have to integrate above technologies into E-learning for better service

and to pursue all technology frontiers and to explore any potential from technology for improving teaching E-learning.

Extend to More Applications

Now E-learning is mainly applied in formal education system. In fact there are huge demands for education in informal learning, such family learning, and community learning. E-learning can be the best way to meet informal learning needs.

Conclusion

We have made much progress on E-learning in the past ten years in China. There are still many challenges for E-learning. E-learning has a long way to be better enough. Anyway E-learning is on the right way and pushed by the huge demands from life long learning and quality education in China.

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