M-2009

APPROACH ON AN INNOVATIVE WAY FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Li Yawan, China Central Radio & TV University, China
Niu Hui, China Central Radio & TV University, China

Summary

It is of vital importance for ODL teachers to develop competence when they mean to support their learners effectively. However, for a long time, the function of ODL teachers has been neglected. And eventually there are less descriptions and approaches on ODL teachers' professional development. Many evidence show that ODL learners do need support from both institutions and their teachers not only for course contents, but also for improvement of their autonomous learning ability. Considering effective learning support to the students, tutors should constantly update their knowledge and skill and enable themselves to be equipped with considerable expertise and capability to control and manage academic activities, to design and evaluate students' achievements. Effective preparations for organizing teaching and learning is imperative for professionals and online forum is an effective way for interaction among teachers, which may demonstrate many advantages such as quick information flow; mutual intelligence exchange, cost effectiveness and collective wisdom sharing. The case study in the CCRTVU for professional development on the subject of accounting will offer some hints to other practitioners that collective preparations for teaching by using online forum will facilitate subject construction and development of faculty members' comprehensive competency.

Introduction

Collaborative preparation for teaching is not a new term in traditional educational vocabulary. However, in the context of online education, it seems a very efficient way for teachers' professional development through application of information communication technology. In guiding effective learning of online education, the teachers' role has already gone beyond of transmission for knowledge and skill. The teachers' function as facilitators in online teaching and learning transactions has in effect created essential impact on students' success. Therefore, teachers need to make approach on the new way of improving their expertise as well as skills and competence by using new technologies for their professional development so that they can work efficiently and effectively as ODL teachers.

This article will present a case study in the CRTVUs of collaborative online preparation for teaching in the subject of accounting. It presents a more innovative way of pooling wisdom from peer faculty members to improve effective teaching via using new technologies. The measures taken for collaborative online preparation for teaching contents, methodology, and getting familiar with the students' status quo have given the CRTVUs' teachers incentive and confidence, which has further aroused teachers' reflection on their original teaching work and brought into their expecting teaching work more enthusiasm and responsibility on the part of a practitioner.

According to Helen Lentell, "Tutors in distance education have always been undervalued" (2003, p64). However, in the context of ODL, it is also like Dörnyer's narration for traditional teaching environment, "Teaching skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness" (1998, p131). Many evidences show that distance learners need institutional and tutors strong support to help them fulfill their learning objectives. In fact, with more emphasis on the part of our tutors in inducing and facilitating functions, the methodology of training tutors to be qualified teachers has been paid attention to.

Features of the CRTVUs' system for running distance education

The CRTVUs' system is known as a nation-wide distance education network in China. It consists of four tiers of operating structures for academic management with 1 China Central Radio & TV University (Hereafter CCRTVU), 44 Provincial Radio & TV Universities (Hereafter PRTVUs, 956 branch schools at prefectural and city levels (Hereafter PRTVUs), and 1875 working stations at county-levels. It is evident that to carry out distance teaching and learning within such a large system really need careful design, effective management and constant innovation. Owing to the particular situation, teachers working in the CRTVUs have to consider at any time the impact that the system might create on their teaching mode and effects.

Composition of faculty members and their responsibilities

There is a massive teacher rank in the CRTVUs with more than 49,600 full-time and 37,100 part-time. There are also different functions on the part of CRTVUs' teachers. Generally speaking, there are three categories of teachers. The first category is those invited experts and scholars from other well-known institutions, who work as chief editors or course presenters. The second category contains the faculty members in the CRTVUs, who mainly work as course coordinators. The third category is actually part-time tutors, who offer student support in the course of teaching and learning. However, with the lapse of time, there seems an obscure in the distinction. More and more faculty members in the CRTVUs have been involved in course design and development. Meanwhile, they have taken up the responsibility in organizing academic activities and training tutors. Within the CRTVUs' system, faculty members in the Central Radio & TV University need to assume more responsibilities in guiding academic activities in the system rather than offering lectures and dealing directly with students. The principle of standardized course delivery and unified examination has to be worked out at the central level so as to ensure quality teaching in the whole system.

Approach on professional development in online education

In the context of traditional distance education, there is less interference with the teachers for their professional development. Most of the faculty members worked alone and they often felt isolated and helpless when they were meeting with difficulties. With the emergency of ICT, peer community has been created not only for the purpose of sharing ideas, insights and experiences, but also for academic exchanges and expertise upgrade. By virtue of no easy access to one another in the traditional way, CRTVUs have tried in the past years to find out good solutions in organizing the faculty members to take part in the online forum and discussion for their professional development to enable them to be competent in guiding their students.

Collaborative online preparation for teaching is an effective way for professional development

Since CCRTVU has set up requirements that local RTVU should assure equivalent standards of teaching within the system, it is imperative for the local teachers to understand the teaching concept and thought of clues in organizing teaching activities from the course presenters and coordinators at the central RTVU. Meanwhile, it is also necessary for the course presenters and coordinators at the central RTVU to learn about the teaching conditions and perplexity from the local teachers. Interaction between the central RTVU and local RTVUs is of vital importance and communication and discussion on teaching content, methodology and expertise is really beneficial to mutual sides. Traditional way of communication can be made through face-to-face meeting by setting up a round table. However, owing to the limited space and fixed timetable, plus travel expenses, there would be few to be involved and usually the

outcome of meeting is always inefficient. The open education project launched by the CCRTVU provided various teaching and research departments with opportunities to make trial for collaborative online preparation for teaching.

Collaborative online preparation for teaching in the specialty of accounting at the CRTVUs

In the CRTVUs, the specialty of accounting is catalogued into the discipline of management. According to our statistics, there are now more than 120,000 students enrolled in the specialty of accounting. The students registered at different places and the faculty members involved in the specialty are scattered all over the country. Then how to guide our students for program learning remains a question. With a view of increasing efficiency and improving quality teaching, the CCRTVU has launched a special forum for collaborative online preparation for teaching. Originally, training programs might be taking place once several years. But now, with easy access to internet, it enables the academic activities to be more frequent, convenient, flexible, and cost efficient. To implement collaborative online preparation, one of the experienced faculty members working as course coordinator at the CCRTVU will be appointed as the host. A domain will be given and a password will be entrusted with every participating tutor. For each discussion, a topic theme will be distributed among the participants ahead of time. So when the forum starts, all the participants can concentrate on the particular topic and air their views freely based on their accumulated knowledge and experiences. The host will control the entire track by adjusting and navigating the discussion. Meanwhile, the host will also convey the teaching requirements from the chief editors and course presenters as well as the concerning departments of the CCRTVU to the participating tutors and at the same time collect requirements and expectations from the tutors. Thus, interactive channel has been opened up with the facilitation of course coordinators. (See Online Forum 1)

Implementation

In September, 2002, the specialty of accounting started its academic activities of collaborative online preparation for teaching in the courses of Case studies for Accounting, Advanced Accounting, Analysis of Financial Statement, Advanced Financial Management, and Case Studies for Auditing. The course coordinators have done a lot at the initial period. They need not only prepare for the core content, but also liaison the experts and put the announcement of time schedule, domain, and main content for preparation on the CRTVU-online. The computer will record the number of participants so that the host may be informed of the performance for collaborative online preparation for teaching each time. (See Online Forum 2). To assure the success of collaborative online preparation for teaching, the course coordinators will also contact the tutors at different levels through telephone beforehand. In this way, proactive involvement in the activities can be guaranteed from the local tutors at different levels when the online forum starts.

Online Forum 1: Interaction and discussion
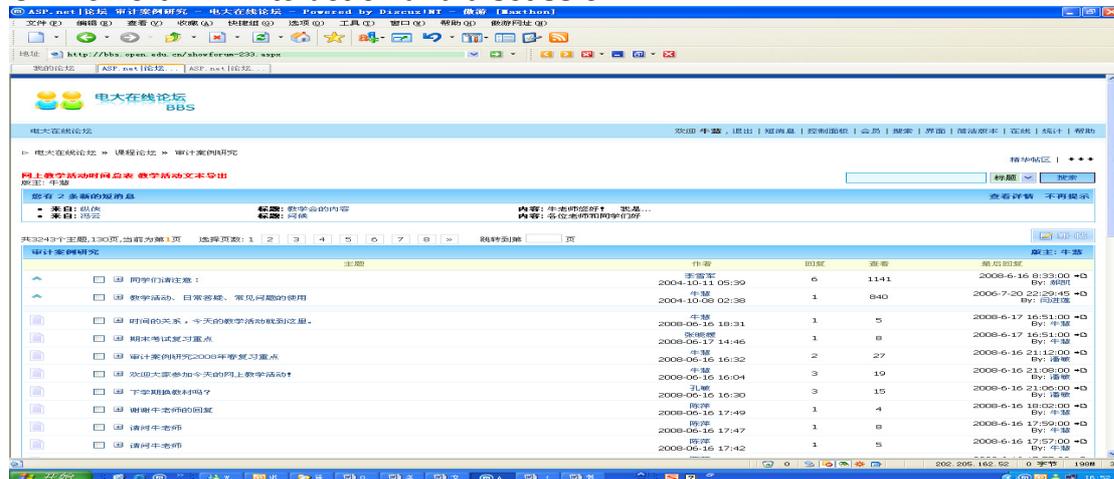
Online forum 2: Record of the Performance for Implementation

To some incomplete statistics, there are more than 10350 person/times from the tutors at 650 prefectural & municipal level RTVUs and 40 provincial RTVUs have participated in the academic activities for collaborative online preparation for teaching. The results are fairly good and every time of collaborative online preparation for teaching has reached its goal.

Looking at the implementing process of this innovation, we have really appreciated many beneficial respects.

Significance of Collaborative online preparation for teaching
Collaborative online preparation for teaching has demonstrated some features and efficacious effects as follows:

1.   It has enabled information delivery timely and quickly.
The academic activities of collaborative online preparation for teaching are depending on the three-level platform in the CRTVUs' system, applying efficiently the well-established distance online meeting halls, and exerting the systematic advantages into full swing. According to our scheduled time, tutors all over the country gathered in the virtual environment have not only exchanged their teaching experiences through online discussion, but also obtained valuable feedback. It has transferred the latest academic development related into the particular subject they prepared to all the participants. Furthermore, it has also filled up the imperfection among course presenters, coordinators, and tutorial teachers for the separation of time and space.

2.   It has made collective intelligence mutually complementary.
It is known to all that ' two heads are better than one'. When the course presenters, course coordinators and tutorial teachers (tutors) could speak out freely on the fixed topic, each participant can draw from each other some enlightenment and inspiration. Through collision of thoughts and ideas, more efficient way can be found for their further effective teaching. The collaborative online preparation for teaching enabled many tutors' aspiration to be realized, where, they needn't take long journey to attend the face-to-face tutorials, but have obtained personal professional development through collective input when taking online preparation work for teaching.

3.   It has indicated that reasonable distribution of educational budget can be made.
Since the investment from the government is limited, it is necessary to make reasonable use of the current funding where necessary. In regards of the special characteristics of one course with one tutor and the dispersed teaching venues, it is an effective way to solve the problem of the high expenditure for renting one place and affording so many tutors with accommodation

and travel fares. Collaborative online preparation for teaching has in fact reduced the cost and increased efficiency.

4.   It has reflected that resources can be shared in a larger sphere.
To share teaching resources is another feature and advantage. Every participant can acquire benefits from the academic activities. One tutor can take in some valuable references from others into his/her own tutorials after the academic activity. Meanwhile they can contribute to the collective input and transfer their own possessed resources to others. In this way, individually controlled resources can be transformed into social resources and furthermore, to offer services to the general public. Collaborative online preparation for teaching has spurred tutors to make good use of various kinds of resources, which also, offered premise to assure the teaching quality standards to be increased in the future

Issues to be solved
More and more tutors have come to realize that collaborative online preparation for teaching is an effective measure to lower the cost, upgrade the standards, enlarge the sphere, increase the speed for feedback, and stimulate academic freedom. Many participants regard this kind of activity as a convinced case study to applying new technology in effective distance teaching. However, it needs to be promoted in other fields of study so as to benefit all subjects within the CRTVUs' system and improve the overall standard of teaching quality.

It is true that the CRTVUs have made a big stride in using new technologies for innovative teaching work and professional development. However, there remain some issues.

1.   The awareness towards collaborative online preparation for teaching
Owing to a new way to make online preparations for teaching, some of the tutors have not totally accepted this form of preparation for teaching. They have been accustomed to the traditional way and reluctant to be involved into online activities. Therefore, they lost the chance of going deeper and obtaining a more comprehensive control of the course content and methodology.

2.   The perspective of concern on the part of participants
In collaborative online preparation for effective teaching, the priority concerns from the tutors are usually course contents, the way of organizing activities for the students' term-end review and preparation for the final exams. It seems that fewer participants pay special attention to teaching methodologies and the way of how to guide their students to forge suitable learning strategies.

3.   Impediment of information flow
Though the organizers of the collaborative online preparation for teaching put the announcement online beforehand, some local tutors have no got the habits of scanning the online information delivered regularly, which made those tutors miss the good chance of communicating with others and obtaining necessary help from the online forum.

4.   Timetable
As China is a vast country, there are several time zones according to geographic positions. So, the time difference is another obstacle in organizing the academic activities. To some investigation, the organizers have found out that it is better to arrange the collaborative online preparation for teaching in the afternoon instead of in the morning if it is a synchronous discussion because only in this period of time, can they draw in the largest number of participants.

Perspective
In spit of the issues mentioned above, we may adopt some measures to overcome the obstacle. Through publicity among the tutors, we can let their tutors experience by themselves the advantages they may obtain from the collaborative online preparation for teaching. By inducing the tutors to look at more of good methods and facilitative factors for their quality teaching rather than only fixing their eyes on the course content and the final exam, we may

encourage the tutors to enhance their knowledge accumulation and competency improvement. By making the tutors to get access to the latest development of scientific research and the nation's policies and regulations of their related subjects, we may ask them to link their teaching with the reality. By establishing regulations of inference and assessment of the tutors' performance, we can arouse their enthusiasm, initiatives and responsibilities. By adjusting timetable, we can make the online academic activities accessible to all tutors scattered the whole country.

Conclusion
Distance education is experiencing a transformation phase. In shaping the transition, teachers' role as facilitators cannot be neglected. With a view of providing quality education to the general public, each institution must pay enough attention to constructing a qualified professional rank in the new teaching and learning environment so as to enable our faculty members to work efficiently and perform their due function of facilitators. The CRTVUs' system is a large distance education institution in the world with the largest number of its students. However, its organizing structure for academic management and its well-established three-level teaching & learning platform enabled them to conduct a kind of collaborative online preparation for teaching. This innovative move has opened up a new way of professional development for not only faculty, but also administrative staff, technicians and researchers. The practice has proved to realize interaction, reduce the cost and increase efficiency. When dealing with large-scaled students and the tutor-student ratio being high, we really need to consider how to train our tutor to be more qualified and efficient.

References:
1. Ting, T. Y. (2006) Approach on quality assurance system in China Radio & TV Universities, Beijing: CCRTVU Press
2. Yawan, L., Qingchun, G. Shougang, C., & Haishan, C. (2007) New Technologies in Higher Education: Experiences from Chile and China, Paris: UNESCO
3. Richter, O. Z. (2002) Online faculty support and education innovation-A case study, EURODL
4. Paulsen, M. F. (2006) COGs, CLIPs and other instruments to support cooperative learning in virtual learning environments, Research on competence development in online distance education and e-learning, Odenburg: BIS-Verlag der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg
5. Naidu, S. (2007) Designing instruction for e-learning environment
   http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/procs/siragusa.pdf
6. Chickering, A. W, and Gamson, Z. F (1991) Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. New Directions for Teaching and Learning,   San Francisco: JosseyBass
7. Hui, N. (2007) On reform and development of the specialty of accounting in the CRTVUs, http://www.mastvu.ah.cn/jys/caikuai/jxlt/3.htm
8. Karwachi, P. (2006) Globalisation, Education and Open Distance Learning, *The Will to Learn: Tutor's Role*, Delhi: Shipra Publications
9. Lentell, H.(2003) Rethinking Learner support in Distance Education, *The importance of the tutor in open and distance learning,* London: RoutledgeFalmer