Editorial

Qiyun Wang

Learning Sciences and Technologies Academic Group,
National Institute of Education,
Nanyang Technological University,
1 Nanyang Walk, 637616, Singapore
E-mail: qiyun.wang@nie.edu.sg

Biographical notes: Qiyun Wang is an Associate Professor in the Academic Group of Learning Science and Technologies at National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include online learning, Web 2.0 tools, web-based learning environment design, and interactive learning.

1 Introduction

The construction project of online excellent quality courses was initiated by the higher educational bureau of the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China in 2000. The original aim of the project was to design and develop about 200 high quality web-based courses, a cases' library, and an examination library (MOE, 2000). All the courses and libraries would be free to the public so that anyone can access at anywhere. About three years later, the MOE officially announced another similar project of construction national high quality courses (Wu, 2003). Until now, about 4,000 web-based national high quality courses have been developed by various universities and colleges, and all the courses are supposed to be freely shared online.

Obviously the number of existing online quality courses is high. What is the quality like of the online courses? Can they meet the basic requirements of the MOE project? Do students like to use the courses? What are the features and limitations of the online courses? A lot of questions remain unanswered. Addressing these questions and evaluating the developed online courses will undoubtedly benefit policy makers, researchers, and students (Wang, 2007).

2 An overview of the papers

In this special issue, 11 research papers about the construction of online courses in the context of China are included. These papers describe the courses from different perspectives, from which readers can get an overall impression of online course development in China.

In the first paper about the construction of national quality curricula, Yu investigates a total number of 1,000 national quality curricula which have been developed and approved by the MOE during the period of 2003 to 2010. The study focuses on the

aspects of accessibility, teaching resource construction, and teacher-student interaction. The result shows that the national quality curricula have achieved obvious progress, but they still have some problems. Suggestions are provided based on the problems.

In the second paper written by Liu, she zooms in her research on four specific universities which are newly established in a province of China. She surveys 120 students from each of the four universities about their perceptions on the quality of the online courses they experienced. The result shows that these universities have achieved certain progress in the development and utilisation of online courses. However, the developed courses have very similar problems to those reported by Yu in the first paper. Suggestions are offered based on the findings.

In the third paper about the present situation of web-based English learning in business English schools, Ma carries out a more concrete research study in two schools. She designs a survey based on ten dimensions of networked learning environments. She administers the survey in two different schools, aiming at finding out general problems in web-based business English learning. Suggestions are also provided for teachers and students who are going to use web-based learning in business English teaching and learning.

In the fourth paper about a framework for web-based course and learning tool development, Hao presents a system for developing web-based courses and other learning tools, based on the behaviourist, cognitivist, and constructivist learning theories. By using the system, teachers can set up a course server and create course contents conveniently, and students can also learn by making notes, having discussions, and taking tests. Based on the system, the author has developed some web-based courses in the university, and two of them have been awarded the national quality courses.

Undoubtedly, evaluation is crucial for improving the quality of an online course. In the fifth paper about evaluation of online courses, Liu describes a four-stage evaluation model, which includes diagnostic evaluation, process evaluation, summative evaluation, and feedback evaluation. By following the model, it is most likely that an online course would be gradually developed and improved. In the paper, he presents how a web-based course for the subject of classroom management was successfully developed by using the model.

The remaining papers describe some examples of online courses. In the sixth paper, Li and Zheng investigated online learner participation in the context of a web-based course. Data are collected from synchronous chat room participation, asynchronous blog writing and reading participation, diagnostic tests, and the final exam. Content analysis and social network analysis are employed in analysing the data They find that the content of discussion would be the trigger of engagement in synchronous participation. Comparatively, the close relationship might be a different trigger for online discussion in an asynchronous discussion setting.

In the seventh paper about the students' interactions on a bulletin board system, Jiang presents a case study about examining how a bulletin board system (BBS) improves interactions in an English language learning environment. She finds that reticence still exists on the BBS. She states that some problems of face and anxiety still contribute to some students' reticence. In addition, a fully learner-centred learning environment may make Chinese students feel lost and confused as to what to do, since they have been studying in a teacher-centred educational process for many years.

In the eighth paper, Xie develops a web-based course on Android programming for higher vocational students and discusses how the course contents are created to support

project-based learning. The course embodies personalised learning, project-oriented learning, mutual aid learning, and mobile learning. The students' interview result shows that the course is useful for students to study Android programming and majority students prefer the course's learning activities.

In the ninth paper written by Ma, she investigates on how non-English major students use language learning strategies in a web-based learning environment. The result shows that students in the online learning environment use language learning strategies at a moderately frequent level and that among these strategies, social strategies are used more frequently than the others. She further finds that students who have different English proficiency levels use language learning strategies with different types and frequencies. However, she reminds that despite computers and networks provide many advantages in language learning, they should not substitute face-to-face human interactions.

In the tenth paper written by Zhang, he explores how to apply a network-based learning model into the public physical education courses in a university. The result of the study shows that the students who use the network-based learning model in the experimental group increase their physical quality more significantly than the control group after the second year. Also, the students in the experimental group participate in more extra-curricular activities. Furthermore, the students show great interest in the network-based learning approach. The result indicate that, for the teaching reform of college public physical education courses, creating a teaching website based on the campus network and changing two-year public PE compulsory courses to three-year online courses can be a future direction and feasible trend.

In the last paper about a network-based course, Dong describes the functional design, structural design, and assessment design of the course for the subject of computer network basis at a higher vocational college. A tentative evaluation was conducted on students to examine their perceptions on the design and use of the course. Results show that the network-based course was more efficient than the conventional classroom teaching. Most students mentioned that they gained extra knowledge from the course.

3 Summary

These papers cover a range of subjects (English language, Android programming, computer network basis, classroom management, physical education, and others) at different levels (vocational colleges, regional universities, and national universities). Also, these papers include different models or frameworks for online course development and evaluation, and concrete examples. Hopefully by reading the papers in this special issue, readers can get a full picture of online course construction in the context of China.

References

MOE (2000) 'The notice of implementing the network-based curriculum construction project in the new century', available at http://dls.zzu.edu.cn/wenjianhb/wj/edu02.htm (accessed on 13 March 2012).

Wang, Q.Y. (2007) 'Evaluation of online courses developed in China', *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp.4–12.

Wu, Q.D. (2003) 'Putting excellent quality curricula online to improve the quality of higher education', available at http://www.edu.cn/20040210/3098662.shtml (accessed on 13 March 2012).