Background and Design of the eWorkshops

Initially, these eWorkshops were planned as a traditional face-to-face international conference with the theme ‘Strategic Planning and Management for Distance Education Program’. However, because of the SARS outbreak, they were held virtually in a fully online mode from June 20 to July 31, 2003. The target participants of the eWorkshops were the planners, organizers, faculty members, and administrators in the field of distance education, especially for higher education institutions.

The extent of interest in the eWorkshops was impressive. There were 177 participants from colleges and universities (across a range of discipline areas), government, and corporate organizations. Their geographic spread covered all four major regions of Taiwan. These participants completed six sessions which covered three main aspects which were business and administrative matters, educational concerns, and international considerations. More than 80 short papers contributed by participants were collected at the end of workshops.

The workshops were a model of the practice we were advocating. Participants had access to resources (written, visual and spoken), had opportunities to interact with peers and with facilitators, and had assignments to do to demonstrate their learning. Seven international instructors from Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand and the USA, produced narrated PowerPoint presentations, and designed online forums and assignment tasks. Participants could work through course packs which included the narrated presentations and a course reader in English. Learning support was provided by 12 Taiwanese online facilitators and six tutors working through a learning management system (LMS). During the eWorkshops, participants were encouraged to participate in online discussion forums and complete assignments. All dialogue in the LMS was bilingual, Chinese or English. The relationship between international instructors, Taiwanese facilitators, and participants is shown in Figure 1.

At the end of each session, the facilitators translated participants’ questions into English for the international instructors’ response. The participants were expected to dedicate between 12 and 18 hours to these eWorkshops over the full three-week period. This would allow enough time to review the course content and complete
Figure 1: Architecture of eWorkshops

Instructor
-- Prepare Course Materials*
-- Answer 10 Key Questions

Facilitator
-- Learning Guidance
-- Assess & Evaluate Learning Performance
(see Facilitator Guide for more detail)

Tutor
-- Learning Progress Control
-- Learning Support
(see Tutor Guide for more detail)

Group 1 (heterogeneous grouping)
-- Cooperative Learning
-- Peer Discussion / Cross-Group Discussion
(see Learning Guide for more detail)

Learner-1
-- Self-Directed Learning
-- Constructivist Learning

Learner-40**
-- Self-Directed Learning
-- Constructivist Learning

Note:
* Course Material contains Course Target, Course Outline, Discussion Issues, Suggested Readings, PPT with audio, etc.

** 240 participants divided into 6 groups, 40 in each.


**** Language: Global in English, Local in bilingual (English and Chinese)

E-Mail
Communication Channel****
Telephone
Learning Management System (LMS), Asynchronous Learning Environment

Global
Local
**Table 1: Key successes and key challenges of the eWorkshops**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key successes</th>
<th>Key challenges or ideas for improvements</th>
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<td><strong>Participants found the eWorkshops interesting, attractive and relevant.</strong> 63% of participants expected to benefit from the experiences of the eWorkshops. 42% of participants agreed that the learning outcomes for these eWorkshops were better than traditional face-to-face ones.</td>
<td>Interest and relevance is likely to improve if there are more case studies using a variety of media in the eWorkshops. More thought into the design of discussion questions will also be an enhancement.</td>
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<td><strong>There was a synergy between the eLearning administrative and strategic research group, the learning support team, and the technical support team.</strong> More than 50% of participants agreed that course content and its asynchronous delivery were key drivers for their registration. Overall, 64% of participants agreed that the eWorkshops were well organized and informative, and indicated that they would register for online workshops again in the future.</td>
<td>Despite the success, it is clear that a more continuous monitoring and reporting system is desirable to assist with both administrative issues such as scheduling, as well as technical hardware and software problems. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section of the website should also be developed.</td>
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<td><strong>This model is relatively cost effective</strong> in that the resources developed for the eWorkshops can be reused in a traditional face-to-face or mixed mode situation.</td>
<td>Eventually, the interaction between participants and facilitators needs more attention if the model is to be truly effective. 42% of participants did not agree that the interactions between participants, facilitators, and instructors were sufficient to help understand discussion issues and prepare assignments.</td>
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<td>Participants from all over around Taiwan have successfully cultivated a sense of community by learning through LMS. About 67% of participants agreed that the course content was useful and the attendance was convenient from the perspective of time and learning.</td>
<td>Participants in these eWorkshops are mainly work professionals and academic faculty and staff who must use family time or non-office hours to study. Time for study is a key DE challenge. As a consequence, about one-third of the participants failed to complete because of not keeping up with learning activities and fulfilling instructors’ requirements.</td>
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<td><strong>A pool of participants’ contributions</strong> is being built up that can be shared with peers or other interested persons to stimulate scholarly thought.</td>
<td>We still do not have enough contributors writing their own thoughts. There is a high percentage of participants who like to select CD (75%, agreed) and course reader (90%, agreed) as media for course review, instead of actively involving discussion online and using other complementary (supportive) materials on the LMS.</td>
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course activities and assignments successfully.

**Evaluation Summary**

The evaluation reported here is a brief summary of the first phase of a more detailed study of the perceptions of all stakeholders involved in this initiative. This will be done during the postponed conference which will now be held in December 2003. The aspect of the evaluation reported here involved a questionnaire with a standard five-point Likert scale. Targeting the participants this time, the form was conducted online and by mail with a follow-up telephone survey if necessary. Besides demographic data, the questionnaire contained sections on reasons for registering, learning support, overall satisfaction, and LMS usage.

A total of 88 participant evaluation forms (50%) were received. The largest number of forms came from multi-discipline university participants (70%). The average weekly LMS login was about 3.8 times per participant with an average weekly virtual classroom attendance of five times, which exceeds the three times minimum estimated for the successful completion of eWorkshops. However, the average weekly discussion posting per participant was 1.4 times lower than the two-times minimum required. On a weekly basis, a declining trend from week 1 to week 3 for all three types of activities was observed.

The five key successes and key challenges of the eWorkshops are summarized in Table 1.

**Acknowledgements**

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