UNIVERISTY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, ARTS & SOCIAL SCHOOLS

School of Education

Making our Way through the e-World: Chinese Adult e-learners' Learning Experiences

by

Li Zhen

Thesis for the degrey of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2009

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

<u>**ABSTRACT**</u>

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

<u>**Doctor of Philosophy**</u>

MAKING OUR WAY THROUGH THE E-WORLD: CHINESE ADULT E-LEARNERS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES

by Li Zhen

The thesis describes an investigation into Chinese adult learners' learning experiences through case studies of two e-learning programmes conducted in China that were significantly different from each other in their original design. Margaret Archer's critical realist account of structure and agency informs the theoretical framework of this study. The interactions between individual learners and their e-learning environments combined with their wider social cultural contexts, as manifested in their e-learning experiences are examined mainly through the lens of learners' reflexivity. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and detailed accounts on learners' experiences are given from qualitative data, obtained from interviews, digital diaries, informal discussions and reports. Learners were found to be exercising high level of reflexivity as the basis of their decision making in every aspects of their learning, including their commitment to learn, the formation of a learning community, the use made of learning technologies, adaptation to a new learning environment. The findings suggest that e-learning experiences are not technology-driven nor context determined. These findings have significant implications for e-learning design by reassuring the importance in understanding learners' personal power and social context. They also caution against uncritical direct transfer of educational practice from one context to another.

Table of Contents

List of tables, figures and diagrams

Tables

Figures

Declaration of Authorship

I, Li Zhen

declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

[title of thesis] …Making our way through the e-world: Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences…

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;

2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;

3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;

4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;

5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;

6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

7. Either none of this work has been published before submission, or parts of this work have been published as: [please list references below]:

Signed:...

Date: ..... 5/3/09 ....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The successful completion of this thesis would not have been possible without a great deal of help from many people. I am indebted to you all.

First of all I must express my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr Martin Dyke, for the expert support and advice he has given me, for his patience when at times he must have felt that my progress was slow and for his encouragement at times when I had doubts. Martin has been both a friend and a mentor over the long period that this research has taken and has done much to help my personal professional development beyond the production of this thesis.

The research would not have been possible with the willingly-given co-operation of the participants and the support from institutional managers in giving me access to the e-learning programmes that are at the centre of my study. These people cannot be indentified by name but I express my sincere gratitude to them all.

I am indebted to the School of Education firstly for generously offering me the RGSE scholarship and supporting my successful bid for an ORS reward, without both of which I would not have been able to complete the study.

Thanks are also given to many individual members of the School of Education, in particular Professor Gráinne Conole (now at the Open University), who has helped me at the early stage of the study.

I would also like to express my thanks to my dear friends, Zhangjing, Yangyan, Tianjiao，Xiaoni… for sharing in my 'life beyond study'.

Peter Dunn has been a dear friend and a source of support of many kinds since before this thesis was even begun. Thank you, Peter, for all the help you have given me.

My special thanks and undying gratitude must go to my Mother, Ms. Zhu Siying, who recognizing the value of education and has committed to my success. She has supported me practically and emotionally for many years longer than the duration of this study and I dedicate it to her.

Just me and my research

'So how did you feel,' she asked me,
'When you first arrived in England?
Were you homesick, lonely, afraid,
To be so far away from home?'

I laughed and shook my head.
'None of those', I replied, 'but free,
Free to make my own life at last,
Find myself and be true to me.'

But you who listen now to this,
You are clever and quickly ask,
'Who is this you, this carefree you?
Do you really know who you are?'

Ask me who am I, and I say,
'I am Zhen, a Chinese student.'
And there I am, boxed and labelled.
Chinese – proud of it; a student.

So they label: 'Chinese learner'.
'We know all about you,' they say.
'Our models tell us how you learn:
Ask no questions, just learn by heart.'

'No, that is not true', I reply
'How dare you tell me what to be?
I shall show the label is wrong,
Reclaim myself away from you.'

So is it in the cause of self
That I research for some new key?
To show we are not as you think.
We shall define ourselves, not you.

Keep your learning models at home.
We shall describe ourselves anew,
And I shall show who I really am,
Prove I am different from you.

E-learners in China: the heart
Of this study I left my home
To research. Or was it to search
For my life and the heart of me?

Though I left and knew I was free,
My own study still pulls me back
To the land I left, and I know:
I am that land; the land is me.

There is no world outside ourself
(Oh, good interpretivist line!)
And though I say I study 'them',
The answers will be about me.

Li Zhen
01/02/06

Chapter 1

Introduction

This research began from my personal interest in understanding the nature of learning, and in particular, the cultural and contextual influences on learning. Being a Chinese learner studying in a foreign country for some years, I have experienced some striking differences in approaches to teaching from those I had previously been used to and consequently, different expectations for learning, even for the way of thinking in a new learning environment. These experiences have driven me to ask some basic questions. What are the fundamental features of human learning? What makes different people learn differently and how is the process of learning influenced by their socio-cultural contexts as well as their learning settings? In this study, these questions are posed within the context of the increasing use of new technologies for learning. With the advent of the rapid development of information technology, learning with technologies has become a phenomenon having profound impact on education. There is no exception in China, where e-learning is well established as a prospective means of promoting a knowledge-based society (Kang and Song, 2007). This research, therefore, has been set up to help understand learning in an e-learning environment by looking at Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences in a Chinese context.

The term 'e-learning' is very closely associated with 'modern distance education' in China and in government policy it mainly refers to off-campus provision (Kang and Song, 2007). The history of distance education in China can be traced back as early as the 1950s and the Central University of Broadcast and Television (CUBT), established in 1978, is one of the largest education system in the world, capable of enrolling upwards of 100,000

learners (Keegan, 1994). Satellite TV education has further expanded the scope of higher education in China over the years and created a huge distance learning network (Carr-Chellman and Zhang, 2000). In the 1990s, a new generation of distance education provision came with the rapid development of electronic information and communication technology (ICT) and currently multi-transmission technologies have been used to support teaching and learning, such as compact disk (CD) delivery, local networks, digital communicative satellite systems, video-conferencing, audio-conferencing, teleconferencing and cable TV network and the use of an internet-based delivery system - CERNET (China Education and Research Network) run by the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Kang and Song, 2007). Therefore, the term 'e-learning' adopted in this research encompasses all forms of electronic delivery, whether on-line or via other media and thus interchangeable with on-line learning in some cases.

In response to social and economic development, China has entered the phase of massification of its higher education. The number of students enrolled at higher education institutions jumped from 3.409 million in 1998 to 24.5 million in 2007 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007). Despite this expansion, however, regional differences in HE enrolment remain acute, largely mirroring regional differences in China's social and economic development (Huang, Jiang and Zhang, 2007). Learners are distributed over a vast geographical area in this huge country and it is difficult to disseminate educational resources evenly. In 1999, the Chinese government issued a series of national policy statements to confirm that e-learning was identified as one of the nation's ongoing education projects and the key to the development of lifelong learning and a learning society (MoE, 1999a, 1999b). In these statements, it is clearly declared that the state would

> … take full advantage of the modern distance education network to provide lifetime learning opportunities for all members of society, to provide appropriate education needed in rural areas and outlying districts (MoE, 1999b, Part 2, item 15).

These national policies confirm the role of e-learning in China as facilitating the formation of a modern national educational system, enabling every citizen to enjoy greater opportunities for better education and to build a learning and lifelong learning society. Meanwhile, there has been a rapid growth in the number of internet users in China: from 111 million in 2006 to 253 million by June 2008 (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2008). With support from government and the growth of internet access, the expansion of e-learning has made huge progress. By August 2004, a total of 68 universities with on-line institutes had been established and the number of students engaged in them has already passed 10 percent of the total number of university students in the whole country (Kang and Song, 2007). These on-line institutes are offering both degree and non-degree education in 158 different specialities at three levels: foundation, undergraduate, and postgraduate (Expert Group, 2003). By 2004, over 3 million students were registered in these universities, 97.4% of whom were full-time working learners (Zhang, 2005).

However, under the national policy agenda, it is noticed that many universities competed for MoE (Ministry of Education) endorsement to set up e-learning institutes as a fashion rather than through insightful understanding of the technology (Gu, 2006). Consequently, it is argued that much attention has been paid to transferring traditional teaching resources on-line and developing infrastructure. Comparatively, a much lower level of consideration has been given to the teaching and learning process, pedagogical design and additional support to teachers and learners (Gu, 2006). Thus, despite rapid developments in e-learning in recent years, Internet-based e-learning still suffers from a series of problems. Some on-line courses are direct analogues of conventionally delivered courses, copying directly their structure, modes of assessment, timetable, etc. "Formal education is regarded with awe and treated as the model (not even a model) for distance education" (Gu, 2006:104). Apart from these, there are other problems such as a lack of resources, low efficiency in applying

educational technology, a lack of criteria for management, regional disparities and quality assurance difficulties (Kang and Song, 2007). Among these, the assurance of quality presents the greatest difficulty for MoE. For example, there are close co-operations between e-learning institutes and commercial enterprises: enterprises provide technical support including developing software, practical tools for e-learning or even taking part in the management of the e-learning institutes. However, as Gu (2006) comments, these enterprises might be more interested in student numbers and the returns on their investment than the delivery of quality education.

At the heart of assuring the quality of e-learning is a real understanding of the associated learning phenomena. Such an understanding cannot be achieved by putting learners' experiences aside. It is recognized that knowledge of how learners use and experience e-learning/technology in their learning activities is crucial for the development of tools, pedagogies and teaching practices (Conole & De Laat, 2005).

Unfortunately, there is a surprising dearth of e-learning research that could access these experiences by being mainly from the learners' perspective. E-learning as a relatively new area of practice and research has attracted significant educational investment yet its education value is often contested (Sharp et al, 2005). Consequently, in their review, Sharp et al (2005) have found that the overwhelming majority of on-line learning research to date has focused on establishing the value of particular e-learning course designs, teaching methods or tutor interventions, or has been about very specific and often narrow aspects of on-line learning. "The objectives have been teacher, course or programme-focused rather than student-focused, with an evaluative objective aimed at investigating the pedagogic worth of e-learning innovations" (Sharpe et al, 2005:3). Factors identified in these studies, while undoubtedly valid for certain purposes, are not supporting good decisions about practice since there is a lack of accounts of how learners actually learn and the experience of engaging with learning technologies where the learners - as the crucial participants in the learning process - have been put in the central

position, and thus their experiences have not been fully understood and explained. Therefore, it is not surprising that only limited use has been made of some research findings to guide the reality of e-learning practice.

I shall argue that the danger of marginalization of the learner's voice in e-learning research is similar to the attribution of an epiphenomenal status to humankind in much sociological theory - the displacement of the human subject and celebration of the power of social forces, so that people become nothing more than what society makes them (Archer, 2000a). Consequently, first-person subjectivity and accounts have tended to become taken as much less relevant to the explanation of social actions. If the e-learners' personal power and voice do not count as making much of a difference to their learning experiences, and thereby meriting attention, their learning experiences become treated as very much technology-determined: the effectiveness of the learning is determined solely by the intrinsic nature of the technology. I reject such determinism in my desire to explore learners' perspectives on their learning experiences by putting the learners' voice centre-stage in my research.

Moreover, cross-cultural research (e.g. Biggs, 1996; Watkins and Biggs, 1996; Lee, 1996; Ho, 2001; Kember, 2001) has revealed that, compared with Western learners, significant differences exist in Chinese learners' beliefs and preferences, and hence their approaches to learning that can possibly be related to their distinct philosophical and cultural backgrounds, psychological characteristics and socialization processes. Most of this research has looked at conventional classroom settings, so it is interesting to explore whether these findings transfer to an e-learning context and whether the influence of these distinctive social and cultural contexts is manifested in learners' experiences in e-learning environments. It has to be noted, however, that every society is complex and multifaceted. These adult e-learners in this study should not be ascribed to membership of a fixed cultural entity, which would lead to the pitfall of cultural-determinism – culture determines economic and political

arrangements as well as human behaviour. Although it is anticipated that the study's findings will inform the development and implementation of further e-learning programmes in China so that they are more sensitive to the cultural traditions and needs and characteristics of Chinese learners, I am also aware of the danger of overgeneralization of such cultural traditions as stereotypes which pre-define people to be equated to the culture to which they belong. This awareness is important for and in accordance with the learner-centered position taken in my research. Furthermore this entails the adoption of a powerful theoretical framework to be used in the research to avoid this pitfall.

This study takes place against the background outlined above. It sets out to understand how Chinese adult e-learners learn in an e-learning environment by examining learners' experience in two different types of e-learning programmes in China. One is an International joint programme – the WeSU on-line MA programme for in-service teachers - and the other is the on-line Bachelor Degree Programme at JN University.

WeSU was a Sino-UK collaborative e-learning initiative funded by the governments in both countries through the collaborating universities. It was a two-year project focusing on collaboratively developing e-learning materials at master's level in general issues in methodology, educational psychology and educational technology for in-service teachers from secondary schools in China. The course materials of three modules - 'Educational Psychology' 'Modern Pedagogy' 'Educational Technology' were developed in the first phase. The second phase of the project focused on the trial of these modules, which took place during September 2004 to May 2005. Two trials took place, one with in-service teachers in southern China during September -October2004, followed by the formal pilot with in-service teachers in northern China during March-April, 2005. This study focuses on the experiences of in-service teachers using the materials in the formal pilot in northern China.

The participants were equally divided into three groups, each assigned to study one of the three modules (module 1: Educational Psychology; module 2: Modern pedagogy; module 3: educational technology) by BSD (which hosted the programme) when they were registered on the programme at the beginning of the pilot. Each module included units in Chinese and English. The materials were transferred to online format and were trialled initially in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The units were comprised of different learning sections. For example, there were 12 learning sections in Unit One – 'The role of the teacher' in the Modern Pedagogy Module. There was a fairly even mix of resources and activities in each section: video interviews with UK teachers; case studies; reading and reflective writing (via the journal); forum discussions (each section had at least one forum activity, and sometimes two.) and three 'assignments' – short pieces of writing to be submitted to the tutor. The unit also included some voluntary extension material and activities on reflective practice, for example discussion of the relevance of reflective practice for classroom practitioners, and similarly for learners, since the participants in this case naturally straddled both of these roles. Participants in every module were expected to finish all the learning materials in six weeks. However, the form of assessment was not clear from the outset, until the entire process of the pilot was over, since it was not considered to be a necessary part of the pilot process.

The JN programme was set up in 2004 by the SoDE (School of Distance Education) at JN University. It is a 2-5 years Bachelor Degree programme which offers Bachelor Degree Certificates identical to those from traditional courses at the same level. It had set up 32 study centres across the country and had enrolled 2,429 students in five subjects by March, 2006. There are different forms of course materials provided in each subject, such as textbooks, CD-ROM (electronic version of course content), and multi-media courseware.

Apart from the individual self-study, on-line lecturing is adopted as a main method to aid students learning.
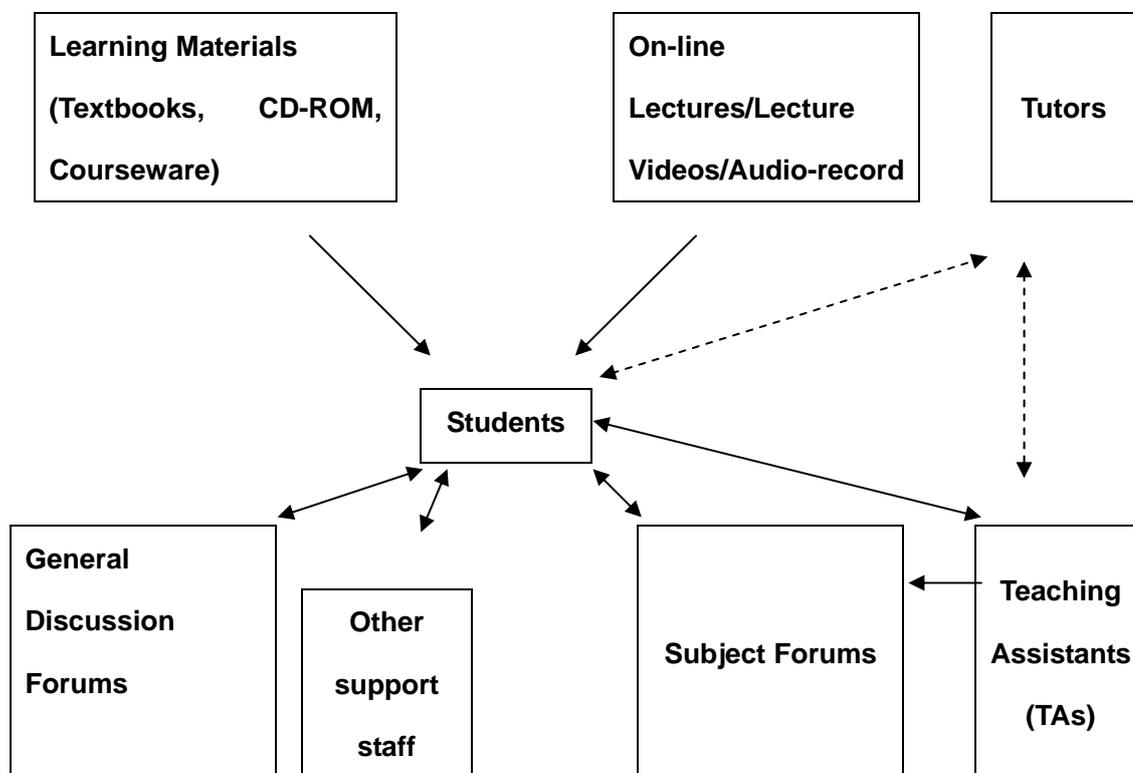
Figure 1.1 Structure of the JN Programme

Each subject has three on-line lectures, one each at the beginning, middle and near the end of the semester. The first one is the introduction to the subject the students are about to learn; the second one mainly deals with any questions students might have had after half a term of study; and the last one concerns preparing for the exam. Students from JN – where the main campus is located - can come to the classroom to meet with lecturers face-to-face in some lectures. Students outside JN can join the lecture through the on-line interactive platform via the school website. These lectures will be recorded and uploaded to the internet afterwards in both video and audio form for downloading by those who could not attend the course on-line when the lecture was given. A general on-line discussion forum and a specific subject forum in each subject are used. The general on-line forum is divided into different sections, such as Technical

Issues and Course Assessment. Each section has a staff member in charge who has the responsibility to answer students' on-line enquiries as soon as possible. The subject discussion forum is in the charge of a Teaching Assistant (TA) who is normally designated by the lecturer of the subject. Very often this TA will be a postgraduate student the lecturer is supervising. There are several assignments in each unit, which students must complete and hand in on-line. Students are also expected to pass the final exam in each subject in every semester, as well as the final dissertation, to get the Degree.

The study is significant and meaningful in contemporary China given the fact that e-learning is being promoted to provide lifelong learning opportunities in China and more than 90% of currently enrolled e-learners are adult learners with full-time jobs, as indicated above. Yet, little attention has been given to how these adult learners learn in these different e-learning programmes and research in this area has remained superficial and anecdotal (Gu, 2006). Moreover, the study is seen as a significant contribution to our understanding the socio-cultural influences on learning and learning with technology in general. It is recognized that all learning is situated in a personal, social and organizational context. Learners' experiences of e-learning are necessarily influenced by the socio-cultural context as well as the e-learning settings in which the learners are situated. Thus a genuine understanding of learners' e-learning experiences entails a careful examination of how the socio-cultural context and e-learning setting exert their influences on learners' e-learning experience.

In order to investigate how individual learners' interact with their e-learning environment, which is shaped by wider social and cultural properties, without falling into the pitfalls of cultural- and technology-determinism, the problem of structure and agency in sociological debate is introduced here. In particular, the account given by critical realist social theory, which addresses this issue, mainly

based on Margaret Archer's work (Archer, 1995, 2000a, 2007), is drawn on as a theoretical and analytical framework in the study. Archer argues that:

> …there are two sets of causal powers involved in any attempt to develop a successful social practice: those of subjects themselves and those of relevant structural or cultural properties. The causal powers of structures are exercised inter alia as constraints and enablements which work automatically…whereas human powers work reflexively.

> (Archer, 2007:9)

Thus, learners gain their learning experiences through engaging with the e-learning programmes embedded in a socio-cultural context. Their e-learning experiences reflect the interplay between these two sets of power: structural power from the social reality and human power from the learners themselves. The structural or cultural properties influence human actions by shaping the circumstances and situations subjects encounter, such as the technology infrastructure, e-learning design, national and institutional policies and regulation, etc. These structural powers, however, are only exercised through agent personal power – reflexivity - which is defined as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa" (Archer, 2007:4). Archer stresses that reflexivity, which is potentially fallible, forms the basis of people's decisions and actions.

An active role is thus assigned to learners, where their personal power is seen as indispensable in explaining their learning experiences (Archer, 2007). The central task of this study is to examine how individual learners use their personal power – reflexivity - to make their way through the e-world and mediate the influences from e-learning settings and the wider socio-cultural

context. Two levels of structural properties are analyzed: macro-structural forces of cultures and institutions and micro structural forces from the course design and learning settings.

The overarching research questions in the study are:

What are the Chinese adult learners' learning experiences in two distinctive e-learning programmes? How do these experiences reflect the learners' personal power acting upon the constraints and enablement from their e-learning settings as well as their social and cultural contexts?

These central questions are approached and answered by posing four sets of sub-questions as follows:

1. *What are the learners' motivations, intentions and concerns in coming to study in the two e-learning courses? How are these affected by the learners' socio-cultural context and e-learning settings? How do these affect learners' learning experience?*

2. *What are the pedagogical approaches and other aspects of learning design employed in the two e-learning programmes? What are learners' reactions to them and how do they influenced their learning? And what are the issues from the course delivery that can be identified as affecting learners' learning experiences?*

3. *How are technologies perceived and actually used by learners in assisting their learning?*

4. *What is the teacher's role in learners' expectations and actual experiences in the two e-learning courses? How does that influence learners' learning?*

As indicated above, a review of the literature on learners' experiences in e-learning leads to the identification of a weakness in our understanding and this was influential in the framing of the research questions. These questions then point to the need to review further literature in relevant areas. An understanding of the nature of learning in Chinese traditional philosophy and how this continues to influence educational practice within the country is essential to understanding the learning contextual experiences of the learners. Such an understanding is also important for the problematising of the transfer of e-learning designs and practices from one cultural context to another or, more specifically in this study, from the 'West' to China. The other part of this problematic transfer demands that we also review the understanding of learning from Western theoretical perspectives that has been so influential in the design of e-learning courses. These various literatures allow us to conceptualise the issues underpinning the research and inform the design of the empirical component of the study. This design and, in particular, the analytical needs of the empirical component also require the adoption of a methodological position and its associated analytical framework and tools. For this purpose, the critical realist position, particularly as developed in the writings of Margaret Archer, was found to be both philosophically convincing and analytically powerful. This framework enables me to address learners' individual powers acting upon their various contexts and settings revealed in the empirical data and, to my knowledge, it has not previously been applied to the field of education, in particular, of e-learning research. The study, therefore, makes a contribution to the field through the application of an emerging theoretical framework to e-learning research.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis begin by exploring the nature and the process of learning within traditional Chinese philosophical backgrounds (Chapter 2), followed by an exploration of the understanding of the learning

process from different schools of Western learning theory, as well as their implications for e-learning practice (Chapter 3). Also in this chapter, Archer's critical realist social theory is introduced and the use of this theoretical framework in my research is explained. In Chapter 4, the research design and data collection and analysis methods are discussed, followed by the presentation of findings (Chapter 5 and 6), with a discussion and conclusions being presented in the final chapter (Chapter 7).

Chapter 2

'Learning' in Chinese Philosophical Tradition and Contemporary Educational Practice

The nature of human learning and the complex process of coming to know have attracted research from different perspectives for centuries. Different understandings and theorizations are derived from wider implicit ideological and philosophical traditions regarding human nature, the nature of knowledge, individuals as learners and their relations to the natural and social world. Recently, "Chinese learners" have attracted increasing levels of interest and attention in research due to their distinctive beliefs, values of learning and education and thus distinctive ways of approaching teaching and learning. In order to understand the Chinese e-learners' experiences in current research and answer the research question of how learners' experiences have been influenced by their socio-cultural context, it is necessary to explore the features of learning in Chinese philosophical traditions and whether they are manifested in contemporary educational practice.

In this chapter, such an exploration starts by introducing and examining ideas from Confucian Philosophies of Education, which are regarded as being by far the most influential components in the Chinese philosophical tradition. This is followed by a review of some on-going debates in the literature regarding learning phenomena associated with Chinese learners' philosophical and cultural traditions in contemporary educational practice.

2.1 Learning in Confucian Philosophies of Education

Confucius is the greatest name in Chinese philosophy, given the fact that no other individual in Chinese history has so deeply influenced the life and thought of his people. "Confucianism since the time of its general acceptance… has become an inseparable part of the society and thought of the nation as a whole. Of what it means to be a Chinese, as the Confucian Classics are…the literary heritage of a whole people" (De Bary et al., 1960:17). These comments support the choice of Confucian philosophies of education as the main source to assist in exploring Chinese philosophical traditions regarding the nature of learning, and the values and beliefs about learning and education that modern Chinese may widely hold.

At the same time, it is necessary to be aware of the complexities involved in such an analysis, Firstly, China is a huge country with a long history of civilization. There are other traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism, together with Confucianism, which have also influenced the development of education. Therefore, we must not simply equate Confucianism with traditional Chinese culture as some scholars have assumed we can do (e.g. Yu, 1996). Secondly, Confucianism as an educational philosophy is represented by different schools of thought and annotations during different eras. Some of these differing interpretations may have arisen and gained respect largely because of their usefulness to the ruling classes in a particular period and need to be carefully and critically examined. Confucius left few if any of his own writings. *'The Analects'* is considered to preserve some of the spirit of Confucius in the recording of his sayings by his disciples after his death, and thus to be the most reliable resource of Confucius' own thinking. It is used as the main source of Confucian philosophy in this chapter. However, to the modern readers it may appear to be difficult to be interpreted because some sayings are set in brief

anecdotes are others are terse and devoid of context (Dawson, 1981:5). The use of many metaphors and stories from Chinese classic literature also makes the texts difficult to interpret. As a famous modern Chinese philosopher – Fung Yulan – points out, the implicit language used by Chinese philosophers in ancient times also gives their sayings nearly unlimited connotations (Fung, 1952). Beside this, Chinese and Western terminologies differ so greatly in meaning that any translation is a particular interpretation, which has been given the translator's own perspective and understanding, which might only depict one level of the original meaning, or even distort it (Fung, 1952). Finally, we must be aware of the dangers of 'over-Confucianism' (Wong, 2004) since Confucian values have become a convenient and fashionable explanation for any observed and actual behavioural traits amongst Chinese learners (Liu and Littlewood 1997). This, along with the complexity and difficulties in understanding and interpreting the original thoughts from Confucius as indicated above, has led to some Confucian doctrines being under-represented while others are over-represented in order to serve the specific purposes of the authors (Cheng, 2000).

Having said this, given the fact that Confucius and his followers undoubtedly have had a tremendous impact on Chinese popular ideology in general and education in particular, it is believed that this chapter is a worthwhile attempt to discern some distinctive influences upon learning among Chinese learners.

2.1.1 Nature and Purpose of Learning

In this section, some leading Confucianists concepts of learning and education are discussed, in view of their great influence on the development of Confucian Heritage thought as well as contemporary Chinese educational practice.

- ***Learning as Becoming – Personal Development and Moral Perfection***

As in Western philosophies of education, the nature of learning in Confucian philosophy is based on its underpinning assumptions about human nature. To Confucius, human nature is neither good nor bad by itself, but a product of the natural, physical and social environment. It can be classified under two categories: the innate and the acquired. All human beings are similar in terms of inborn nature, but acquired habits make up individual differences. "Men are born nearly alike, but become different by practice" (The Analects, XVII.2). Yet, original human nature is changeable, impressible, and moldable by the formation of habits under the influence of society and the environment. Confucius said, "Only the wisest and the most foolish cannot be changed" (The Analects, XVII.3). Confucius declared in reality, however, that very few (even no) people belong to these two categories, including Confucius himself. This presumption of human nature implies the significance of education in raising the young and shaping the personality of the learner by providing the proper environment. Individuality is thus a result of the interplay of nature and nurture: nurture starts from nature but stands far ahead of it. This contrasts with Plato's claim that learning is a matter of reminiscence of knowledge that had been embedded in the soul in a previous existence (Plato, 1961). However, it coincides with John Dewey's philosophy of experience:

Any normal experience is an interplay of those two sets of conditions [external conditions and internal factors]

(Dewey, 1938:28)

In other words, experience is an interaction between an organism and its environment, natural and social. It is a process of "doings-undergoings": "what is done and what is undergone are thus reciprocally, cumulatively, and continuously instrumental to each other" (Dewey, 1934:50). To Confucius, the

learner is an active organism with various potentialities capable of being developed as well as limited by the environment. Thus, learning in Confucian education is a two-way process of creation and re-creation (Cheng, 1952).

Confucius believed in the perfectibility of all men – "Jun-zi" (a morally superior man) appears 107 times in the Analects. The most important virtue that a human being can possess is Benevolence (Ren). Ren is an important definition of the basic Confucian concept of humanity and Jun-zi is the man embodying Ren. Therefore, nobility is not a matter a blood but of character (Chan, 1963), which everyone can achieve through learning. Learning, in this sense, is a lifelong striving for any human being to become the most genuine, sincere, and humane person he or she can be (Tu, 1979), and it is, therefore, moral in nature (Li, 2003).

Unlike Confucius, Mencius (c. 372-289 BC), one of Confucius' most famous disciples, was the first Confucianist to declare that human nature is good. To Mencius, there is no man who is not good, just as there is no water that does not seek low ground (Mencius, VI:2). The goodness of human nature, according to Mencius, is a tendency, which needs to be developed. A poor environment is the cause of failure of the full development of one's natural power. Interestingly, his argument for the possibility of environmental 'pollution' of one's good nature was echoed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century in the West (Rousseau, 1968). Education, in this sense, is the provision of the proper environment to nourish and develop the good impulses of man; learning is a self-development process involving the "bringing out" of what is in man "by nature", not the "putting-in" of something from outside. Furthermore, from Mencius' premise of human nature and everyone having the potential to be educated, emerges the notion that 'everyone can become a sage' (the idea of human perfectibility) (Lee, 1996). As with the 'Jun-zi' of Confucius, Mencius was

convinced by the idea of human perfection through learning, which remains a characteristic of learning in the Confucian tradition and in Chinese educational history.

Xunzi (BC.313-238 BC), another influential disciple of Confucius, disagreed with Mencius, believing that human nature is evil but also changeable, and thus needs to be corrected by education. Therefore, the purpose of Xunzi's education was to eliminate the bad nature of man and build up a well-rounded personality in society. Similarly, Dong Zhongshu, a leading Confucianist in the period of the Han Dynasty, promoted his 'preventive education' by laying stress on the prevention of the bad tendencies in man's nature. Nevertheless, all leading Confucian thinkers agreed on the changeability of human nature, regardless of their differing points of view on the initial condition of human nature itself. This gave the rise to their great confidence in education as a means to create, develop, or remake individuality. As Tu (1979) argues, according to the Confucian tradition, inherent in the structure of the human being is an infinite potential for growth and an inexhaustible supply of resources for development.

This concept of learning in Confucian tradition shows close links with the Western philosopher, John Dewey's concept of education as growth.

…life is development, and that developing, growing is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, that means (i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; and that (ii) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, restructuring, transforming.

(Dewey, 1916:72)

In this quote of Dewey, education should not be narrowly understood as that provided by certain educational institutions but in a broader sense, as learning. Learning is as much part of our lives as breathing which had been in existence since the beginning of time. As Xunzi put it: "learning continues until death and only then does it cease" (Dawson,1981:10). Human beings have to learn through the experience of living and learning is reorganizing, reconstructing and transforming life experiences, "which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (Dewey, 1916: 89-90). Thus, learning is an inseparable part of life. Through education and learning, life, as a self-renewing process, is enlarged, enriched, and preserved (Cheng, 1952). Learning as personal growth and development also implies that the wholeness of the person should be taken into account when trying to understand learning. The nature of learning identified in Confucian philosophy thus resonates within contemporary definition of experiential learning:

Human learning is at the combination of processes whereby whole persons construct experiences of situation and transform them into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions and the senses, and integrate them outcomes into their own biographies.

(Jarvis, 2004:111)

The humanitarian origin of Dewey's philosophy also aligns with Confucius. For Dewey, philosophy should seek to pool human intelligence to solve common human problems. Dewey considered knowledge to arise from the experience of the organism in getting along in life. "Knowledge" in fact is false, Dewey felt, unless it is relevant to concrete problems of living. Solving problems on the basis of experience, and predicting likely occurrences, was all, in Dewey's term, that could be expected of thought and knowledge (Keenan, 1977:39). Reflecting a similar principle, Confucius said to a disciple, "While you are not

able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits? While you do not know life, how can you know about death" (The Analects, XI:11)? Thus, for both Dewey and Confucius, philosophy is neither a metaphysical reality nor a transcendent reality but ordinary life-experience. It is social in origin and social in reference. As a result, both philosophers stress the life experiences of ordinary people in *this* world. The resonance between Dewey's idea and traditional Chinese philosophy of education might have been one of the reasons for the success of Dewey's lectures in China in 1920's (Clopton and Ou, 1974).

In the West, learning as a transforming life experience is a theme evident from Aristotle through Kant to Lewin, Piaget and Kolb. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims that "all our knowledge begins with experience there can be no doubt" (1781:30). This theme is especially echoed by some modern adult learning theorists. According to Usher et al., "in all the traditions of adult learning, experience has been accorded a privileged place as the source of learning in a learner-centred pedagogy and at the very centre of knowledge production and knowledge acquisition" (1997:100). Prior learning experiences have the potential to enhance or interfere with new learning (Knox, 1977; Brundage and Mackeracher, 1980; Jarvis, 2004). Knox (1977) points out that adults are more likely to retain information that they receive if it is meaningful to them and they are able to integrate it into the store of knowledge that they already have. This implies that learners' past learning experiences needs to be respected by teachers and thus learning must be experience-centred (Gibbs, 1960). Brookfield, however, sounds a cautious note against the wholesale acceptance of experiential learning:

Because of the habitual way we draw meaning from our experiences, these experiences can become evidence for the self-fulfilling prophecies that stand in the way of critical insight. Uncritically affirming people's histories, stories and experiences

risks idealizing and romanticizing them. Experiences are neither innocent nor free from the cultural contradictions that inform them.

(Brookfield, 1995: 4-5)

Thus, people can not disentangle themselves from their biographies, their social world and the way we interpret our experiences is influenced by our own biography and culture (Dyke 2006). The primary experience without engaging with the 'Other' or with the experience of the Other would only provide a narrow frame of reference for making knowledgeable decisions (Dyke, forthcoming).

The belief in human perfectibility implies that learning is a lifelong self-cultivation process to reach moral perfection. It is a long- and widely-held belief in China that success is closely linked to 'effort'. Since human beings are born alike, it is believed that differences in ability will decrease and everyone can achieve the stage of being a 'sage' through effort:

If another man succeeds by one effort, he will use a hundred efforts. If another man succeeds by ten efforts, he will use a thousand. Let a man proceed in this way, and, though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong.

(The Doctrine of the Mean, XX:20-21)

- *Learning for Social Development*

Confucius' profound interest in human affairs and in social and political reform gave his philosophy of education a strong social orientation. The development path Confucius depicted for his students was to achieve self-cultivation first, then family harmony, then good order in the state, and finally peace in the empire (The Great Learning, Collected by Chan, 1963). Similar to Plato's notion of 'Guardians' or 'Philosopher-Kings', Confucius would like to have the "*Jun-zi*",

who possessed the vision to see beyond personal profit and material interest to the broader interests of the state and mankind, to be the ruler of the society (De Bary et al., 1960). However, in contrast to Plato, who sees the philosopher becoming a king as a sacrifice, Confucius believed that it is natural and moral for the *'jun-zi'* to govern the country, ruling society by setting himself as a moral example to the ordinary people.

Said Confucius, "The officer, having discharged his duties, should devote his leisure to learning. The student, having completed his learning, should apply himself to be officer" (The Analects, XIX:13). One's own learning becomes a part of the well-being of society at large through the binding of individuals' pursuit of knowledge and self-perfection to a higher moral and social obligation. The application of knowledge to social affairs was highly valued by Confucius:

> If a man who knows the three hundred Odes by heart fails when given administrative
> responsibilities and proves incapable of exercising his own initiative when sent to foreign
> states, then what use are the Odes to him, however many he may have learned?
>
> (The Analects, XIII:5)

There are different interpretations and understandings of this orientation to education and purpose of learning. Some argue that it focuses more on social control than individual development in nature (e.g. Shen, 2001); or that it is pragmatic in nature with the goal of learning being to "competently conduct oneself within a civil job" (Tweed and Lehman, 2002:92). The first understanding appears to align the purpose of education in Confucian philosophy to the ideas of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who saw the major function of education as one of social control and promoting solidarity by transmitting shared norms and values:

Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity; education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child from the beginning the essential similarities which collective life demands."

(Durkheim, 1956:70-71)

Similarly, Confucius' primary concern was a good society based on good government and harmonious human relationships, where the ruler should be a *'Jun-zi'* (a man of *ren)*: "If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders they will not be obeyed" (The Analects, XIII: 6). However, *Ren* is a wide-ranging moral term that represents the very pinnacle of human excellence (Stephenson & Harberman, 1998), and which is less specific and fixed compared with the "essential similarities" of Durkheim, which tends to reflect the needs and interests of dominant group. The man of *Ren* is a true '*Jun-zi*', who "wishing to establish his own character, he also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, he also helps others to be prominent" (The Analects, VI: 28). A strong sense of altruism and harmonious human relationship is revealed in Confucianism. The two-part composition of the Chinese character of '*Ren'* - one component for "human" and the other for "two" – represents two people standing together in harmony. To Confucius, the virtue of humanity is meaningless unless it is involved in actual human relationships. '*Ren*' is 'loving people' and 'human-heartedness' and trust is a critical ingredient of all dependent social interactions. This balanced and harmonised human relationship and relationship between self and society starts from personal self-cultivation, which strongly links this social component of education to individual orientation. Self-cultivation and contributing to society thus constitute a continuous process of learning in Confucian philosophy. Those who wish to govern should cultivate themselves in order to bring order to the state and those who have cultivated themselves sufficiently should exert influence on society.

Li (2003) argues that contributing one's knowledge and skill back to society should not be confused with one's personal gains. Confucius said: "The Jun-zi cherishes virtue; the inferior man cherishes possessions. The Jun-zi thinks of sanctions; the inferior man thinks of personal favours" (The Analects, IV:11). For Confucius, actions performed to increase one's wealth or power only, without moral motivation, will lead to immoral circumstances and social disharmony. "If one is guided by profit in one's action, one will incur much ill will" (The Analects, IV:12). However, inspired by Confucius's original idea to select the educated people to be civil servants, the Civil Service Examination system was adopted and remained in force for over 2,000 years in China. Some argue that it is also true in Chinese history that "a government office can also be a source of external rewards associated with fame, wealth, a beautiful wife, and upward social mobility, which have nothing to do with internal sagehood" (Lee, 1996:37). The socio-economic privileges of scholars and the possibility of upward social mobility through educational success inspired countless generations of Chinese to be interested in learning. As a result, "High office and high education were united in China to an extent never reached in any other country" (Shryock, quoted in Cheng 1952).

Therefore, the individual and social functions of education are not mutually exclusive in Confucian tradition and there is always a correlation between a person's internal establishment and external performance. As Lee (1996) notes, they not only co-exist but can somehow be integrated. Succeeding in academic work, career and other individualistic achievement goals are related very closely to success in family and social life, and vice versa. Education, therefore, is significant from both an individual and a social perspective for Chinese learners.

2.2.2 The Way of Coming to Know

Four sets of dialectical features constitute the process of coming to know in Confucian philosophy of education: learning and thinking; transmitting and creating; knowing and doing, and teaching and learning.

- *Learning and Thinking*

For Confucius, learning and thinking are two sides of the same coin, as these words indicate: "He who learns without thinking is lost. He who thinks without learning remains puzzled" (The Analects, II: 15). The Chinese term for knowledge is made up of two characters: one is '*xue*' (to learn) and the other is '*wen*' (to ask). This implies that the central quest for knowledge includes the spirit of enquiry and the act of questioning (Cheng, 2000, Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Wong (2004) argues that doubt and realization form the central themes of learning in Confucianism. In his book 'Du-shu-fa (Reading method)', Zhu Xi[1] – a central figure of neo-Confucianism – noted that: "Reading books is to arouse doubt when one does not doubt and let those in doubt settle in the state of no doubt. This is how one grows" (Chu, 1990:46-47). Thus, according to Zhu, effective reading depends on a willingness to doubt, not just the views of others but one's own as well because "only a genuinely inquiring mind would have the tendency to pursue the truth fully" (Chu, 1990:47). Arousing doubts requires the learner to be open-minded, not taking for granted that what one reads is correct, and avoiding bringing in one's own preconceptions. At the heart of his du-fu-fa was the conviction that the students had to do more than simply read through the texts but should also "experience them personally" (Chu, 1990).

Generally speaking, in reading, we must first become intimately familiar with the text so that its words seem to come from our own mouths. We should then continue to reflect on it so that its ideas seem to come from our own minds. Only then can there

---

[1]Zhu, is the current Pinyin romanisation; Chu, is the earlier Wade-Jiles romanisation, in which form the author's name appears in this edition.

be real understanding. Still, once our intimate reading of it and careful reflection on it have led to a clear understanding of it, we must continue to question. Then there might be additional progress. If we cease questioning, in the end there'll be no additional progress.

(Chu, 1990:135)

This approach of learning is also advocated by Dewey (1933) who argued that learning requires open-mindedness, the ability to consider all points of view, taking active control of one's actions and being aware of the consequences of your actions for others.

Confucius opposed 'pure thinking': "I once spent the whole day without food and whole night without sleep in thinking. I gained nothing from doing so. It is not so good as learning" (The Analects, XV:31). Thus the learning path depicted in the Confucian tradition is "To study extensively, to be steadfast in one's purpose, to inquire earnestly, and to reflect on what is at hand (that is, what one can put into practice) - humanity consists in these" (The Analects, XIX: 6). Reflection and questioning, therefore, are closely linked with reading and understanding. Questioning and criticism, however, are located at the end of the learning process, which contrasts with Western encouragement of learners' questioning and evaluating throughout the learning process (Tweed and Lehman, 2002).

According to this, therefore, I would argue that there is no lack of the spirit of questioning and reflection in Confucian philosophy of education; rather, students were not encouraged to engage in argument before they had read widely or observed carefully and understood properly. What Confucius advocated was more careful and thoughtful thinking, but not any arbitrary decision-making. "On matters that he does not know, a Jun-zi shows a cautious

reserve…The Jun-zi, in what he says, leave nothing to mere chance" (The Analects, XIII:3). However, this is seen as an 'inflexible, linear learning path' by some Western scholars (e.g. Tweed and Lehman, 2002). And yet, the value of careful thinking and understanding before the critique and questioning has begun to be realized. In their article comparing the Confucian tradition in the East with the Socratic tradition in the West in terms of their influences on teaching and learning preference, Tweed and Lehman caution against teaching based on a caricature of the Socratic orientation in the West:

We support teaching that inspires inquiry and sound thinking… (while) modeling an extreme Western and somewhat distorted Socratic value system in which criticism receives more emphasis than thinking, doubt is seen as morally superior to belief, and efforts to understand are at risk owing to premature criticism and rejection of others' ideas.

(Tweed and Lehman , 2002:97)

They conclude that there is probably a place for teaching students how to develop appreciative thinking and how to criticize competently.

For Confucius, thinking includes both memory and understanding: "There may be those who act without knowing why. I do not do so. Hearing much and selecting what is good and following; seeing much and keeping it in memory, this is the second style of knowledge" (The Analects, VII:27). Memorising, in terms of making oneself familiar with the text is seen as a first step and a significant part of learning in Confucian philosophical tradition. Repetition until internalizing brings about understanding can be a general strategy employed to bring about reflection and hence deeper understanding (Wong, 2004). In another text Zhu Xi wrote:

Learning is reciting. If we recite it then think it over, think it over then recite it, naturally it'll become meaningful to us. If we recite it but don't think over, we still won't appreciate its meaning. If we think it over but don't recite it, even though we might understand it, our understanding will be precarious.

(Chu, 1990:138)

Wang Yangming, an early sixteenth century neo-Confucianist echoed this by saying:"If you simply want to memorize, you will not be able to understand; and if you simply want to understand, you will not be able to know the sources [of truth] in yourself" (cited by Chiang, 1924:87).

Similarly, to Wang, understanding what is in books is seen as preliminary and necessary before one can make reference to the material and incorporate it into one's experience. Memorization, therefore, leads to understanding but should never be an end in itself (Lee, 1996).

Many researchers have noted that memorization (using repetition) should not be equated with rote learning. Biggs (1996) made a distinction between rote learning and repetitive learning: one is learning in a mechanical way without thought of meaning and the material would be reproduced without understanding, whilst the other is using repetition as a means of ensuring accurate recall. In their study, Marton Dall'Alba, & Tse (1996) found the distinction is 'within' memorization, rather than 'between' memorization and understanding. They argue that memorizing and understanding are not to be seen as differing in nature. They contribute to each other in a developmental sense, where repetition can be used to highlight and focus on different part of the text and hence facilitate understanding. Thus, "either-or" in the West becomes "both-and" in the East (Biggs & Watkins, 1996). Evidence of the conjunction of memory and understanding for Chinese learners is also reported

in some empirical studies (Gow, Balla, Kember and Hau 1996; Watkins, 1996; Dahin & Watkins , 2000). Among these, some reported that whereas Western students saw understanding as usually a process of sudden insight, Chinese students typically thought of understanding as a long process that required considerable mental effort – including using memory to progressively understanding the material.

- ***Transmitting and Creating***

It is said that Confucius loved the past and Confucianism is "a fairly conservative tradition that looks to the past for guidance..(that) may be seen as an attitude that restricts the creativity of individuals in the present" (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998:43). This saying is often quoted to support this: "I transmit but do not create. I believe in and love the ancients. I venture to compare myself to our old P'eng[2]" (The Analects, VII:1). However, there are facts that show Confucius himself was actually a creator: he was the first one to offer education to all (Fung, 1952); he evolved the concept of *'Ren'* (benevolence) which became central to Chinese philosophy and also formulated some other fundamental concepts of humanism, the Way, Heaven, etc. (Chan, 1963). Thus it is clear that Confucius was both a creator and a transmitter. As a teacher, Confucius saw his job firstly as to introduce the classics to students; while in the process of transmission, he always adds his own understandings and gives the classics new perspectives: "A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others" (The Analects, II:11). Therefore, learning in this sense, is a process from the known to the unknown: the known (the past) is the source and basis of the unknown (new knowledge); the unknown is the development of the known.

On the contrary, according to Confucius, ignorance of the past is a major cause

---

[2] An official of the Shang dynasty (1751-1112 B.C.) who loved to recite old stories.

of the troublesome human condition (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). Confucius criticizes those who create without understanding and suggests listening and seeing more before one can create (The Analects, VII:28). This idea remained in the Confucian tradition as this excerpt shows:

In the transaction of business success depends on preparation beforehand: without preparation there will be failure. If you decide beforehand what you are going to say, *(when the time comes)* you will not stutter and stammer; and if you are decided on what you are setting out to do, you will fall into no quandaries.

(The Doctrine of the Mean, Collected by Hughes, 1942:39)

History's purpose was to serve as a moral guide to present conduct – "for in the common Chinese metaphor history was a mirror in which men could see their own actions, understand their own motives, and judge their own behaviour" (Dawson，1981:13-14). Therefore, to understand the past is to better engage with the present. Innovation is acceptable only after extensive preparation. On the other hand, excessive generation of ideas was seen as a fault. This is similar to the learning path that Confucianists advocated, where questioning and reflection should come after memorizing and understanding, as discussed in last section.

It is necessary to note that it is a commonplace of ancient Chinese literature to equate education with moral training (Dawson, 1981). Knowledge is a key component to ethical action and knowledge of rites (*li* - proper disciplined actions) functions as a guide for action and a right way of doing anything. Thus, this specific knowledge has distinct connotations with the 'knowledge-about-the-world' in Western philosophical tradition, which has implications for the way of obtaining it. In regard to moral perfection, it is suggesting that there is a standard path, a routine that the learner can and

should follow (Wong, 2004). The first step of this learning path appears in the acquisition of essential knowledge (Tweed and Lehman, 2002) or "knowing the basics" (Wong, 2004). After inspecting the three Chinese traditions of calligraphy, martial art and seal carving, Wong (2004) found that there is a belief in mastery of the basics (content, basic skills, drills, etc) as essential for the development of higher-order skills. Jin and Cortazzi (1998) found that Chinese teachers believe that creativity comes on the basis of firm knowledge, skill and technique, and only after these have been acquired can pupils become creative. Thus, they conclude that it is 'learning to become being creative' that pervades in China compared with 'learning through being creative', as held by some British teachers. Yet, Tweed and Lehman (2002) suggest that Western instructors might find the acquisition of essentials useful because the ability to solve unfamiliar problems in most sciences requires thorough acquisition of fundamentals and a practiced ability to apply those fundamentals. Other evidence suggests that originality of thought is related to the amount of organized knowledge that people possess (Johnson, 1972, quoted by Gagné and Driscoll, 1988). If this is the case, the truly original thinkers are people who have vast stores of knowledge in many fields. Theory is recognised as an important source of learning as many educational theorists would agree (e.g. Usher and Bryant, 1989; Jarvis, 1987).

However, socio-economic changes have required greater creativity, innovation and adaptability (Lash and Urry, 1994). A clear and fixed learning path, however, might inhibit such creativity and innovation to be developed by failing to create a useful atmosphere of ambiguity, uncertainty and puzzlement where different ideas and learning preferences can be flourished and developed. Moreover, some maintain that great stress placed on the transmission of documents has led to the written words becoming sacred in traditional Chinese educational history (e.g. Dawson, 1981). The status of knowledge in current society,

however, is closely related to developments in technology (Oliver et al, 2007). Computers will change the society's view of knowledge to those things that could be represented by computers (Lyotard, 1979). Lyotard (1979) argues that computers support the generation of new pieces of knowledge because the digital form of knowledge can be almost limitlessly disseminated and analysed, re-inscribed, re-applied and re-appropriated. The authority behind these texts is thus hidden and decreased. However, it is necessary to discern the difference between information and knowledge. Jarvis regards theory as information in its raw un-reflected state and merely represents 'potential knowledge' (1999:144). Thus, "what is learnt and accepted becomes knowledge. Knowledge is subject, information is not" (1999:147).

Furthermore, the world we are currently living is featured by constant and rapid change, which is referred to by Giddens as a 'run away world' (1999); by Beck as 'a risk society' (1992); by Bauman as 'liquid modernity' (2000) and by Archer as 'nascent globalisation'(2007). The information revolution has produced vast amounts of new and often contradictory information and the increasing impact of technologies results in unintended consequences (Giddens, 1999). The speed and scope of information change calls for the need to transform this information into knowledge. Therefore, there is a danger of equating information to knowledge. Some suggest that nothing is certain in such a culturally rich and complex society with changing norms and values (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 2000; Castells, 1996) and traditional routines work only in recurrent and predictable circumstances (Archer, 2007). Therefore, it can be questioned to what extent history and past experience can still serve as guides to present conduct when our knowledge is becoming more short-term, contingent and open to revision in the light of new information and experience (Dyke et al, 2007). Thus, some argue that a different relationship to received forms of wisdom is required: one that values the past experience and

knowledge claims of others, but does not defer to it (Dyke, forthcoming). The disjuncture of experience and the breach of understanding could be more fiercely experienced by e-learners in their e-learning environments, where the technologies could have more profound impact on the process of teaching and learning. Some of the ways in which technologies are changing our practice are only just beginning to be understood (Conole et al, 2007). Thus, to make more knowledgeable decisions, some argue that it is essential and incumbent on everyone to exercise more and more reflexivity in increasingly greater tracts of our lives (Archer, 2007) and to advocate reflective approaches to our learning (Dyke, 2001), or to deliberate on a 'reflexive monitoring of the self' (Giddens, 1991).

- *Knowing and Doing*

Is it not a pleasure to learn and to repeat or practice from time to time what has been learned? (The Analects, I:1)

This opening sentence of the Analects indicates the value of practice emphasized in Confucian learning. Dawson argues: "for Confucius, and for the Chinese tradition in general, learning did not usually mean the accumulation of facts for their own sake. It meant the gathering of knowledge for the sake of guiding one's conduct" (1981:10). The learning process is one of continuously practicing moral virtue (*Ren*). Confucius believes trust is a critical ingredient of all dependable social interactions and relationships (Stevenson & Haberman, 1998). To attain trust, there are must be agreement between name and actuality, between word and deed. This is called 'rectification of names' (正名, *Zhengming*). Words are easy to produce but without the connection between word and actuality, they can be used to conceal the truth, and thus genuine trust is lost. Therefore, a *'jun-zi'* is a person who "acts before he speaks, and

afterwards speaks according to his actions" and is "ashamed to speak more and do less" (The Analects, 2:13; 4:24). Therefore, words and actions should correspond. The discussion of the connection between knowledge and action remains extensive in Confucian philosophy.

Zhuxi argues:

> Knowledge and action always require each other. It is like a person who cannot walk without legs although he has eyes, and who cannot see without eyes although he has legs. With respect to order, knowledge comes first, and with respect to importance, action is more important.
>
> (Zhuxi, 3:8a, Collected by Chan, 1963:609)

Knowledge – and hence learning – is seen as an essential prerequisite for action but that action is the ultimate fulfillment of knowledge "When one knows something but has not yet acted on it, his knowledge is still shallow. After he has experienced it, his knowledge will be increasingly clear, and its character will be different from what it was before" (Zhuxi: 3:12b).

Xunzi echoed this by saying:

> Not having learned it is not as good as having learned it; having learned it is not as good as having seen it carried out; having seen it is not as good as understanding it; understanding it is not as good as doing it. The development of scholarship is the extreme of doing it, and that is its end and goal. He who carries it out, knows it thoroughly.
> (Xunzi, 1928:113)

So far, the stress has been on the importance and connection between the two but the identity of knowledge and action are still separate. Wang Yangming

opened a new vista in Chinese philosophy by raising his idea of the identification of doing and knowing. Wang declared "My idea that true knowledge is what constitutes action and that unless it is acted on it cannot be called knowledge…knowledge in its genuine and earnest aspect is action, and action in its intelligent and discriminating aspect is knowledge" (Wang Yangming, 133, collected by Chan, 1963:681). He thus cautions against learning stopping at knowing without doing.

> People today distinguish between knowledge and action and pursue them separately, believing that one must know before he can act. They will discuss and learn the business of knowledge first, they say, and wait till they truly know before they put their knowledge into practice. Consequently, to the last day of life, they will never act and also will never know.
>
> (Wang Yangming, 1.5a-8b, Collected by Chan, 1963:670)

Therefore, learning did not "tend to be a mental and abstract activity rather than physical and overt action" in Confucian tradition, as some authors believed (e.g. Cheng, 1952). The tendency to bookish learning in certain periods in Chinese history might be interpreted as distortions introduced by the influential power of the Civil Service Examination System. The connection and even the unity of knowing and doing, however, reveal a great emphasis on practice in the learning process, as in the five-steps of learning summarized in the Doctrine of the Mean: study it extensively, inquire into it accurately, think over it carefully, sift it clearly, and practice it earnestly. Similarly, the emphasis on praxis in the Western tradition can be traced as far back as Aristotle, who argued: "thought by itself, however, moves nothing; what moves us is thought aiming at some goal and concerned with action" (Irwin, 1985:150). In the 'Thesis of Feuerbach', Karl Marx's gives his materialist perspective on social life, which is essential practical. He argues that if theory is to escape mysticism, it must find its solution

in human practice and the understanding of this practice. Practice as concrete human experience also lies at the heart of John Dewey's learning philosophy.

Yet, arguably, there is a cultural difference that can be traced here: in Confucian philosophical tradition, greater emphasis has been given to the application of knowledge into practice and therefore knowing leads to doing and action. As Wang Yan-ming puts it: "knowing is the direction of doing, doing is the practice of knowing; knowing is the beginning of doing and doing is the consummation of knowing" (Wang Yanming, 1.5a-8b, Collected by Chan, 1963:669-670). Whilst, in the West, "Learning by doing" was also advocated by many Western thinkers, such as John Dewey (1916), Kolb (1984), Jarvis(2004), Archer (2000a) as well as in some learning theorizations, such as Situated Learning and Activity Theory. Archer (2000a), for example, argues that practice is central to our constitution as self-conscious human beings, and in the forms of knowledge generated by them; and thus central to human beings are not 'meanings' but 'doings'. Or, as Nardi suggests, that "you are what you do" (Nardi, 1996:7). This is the case when we think that we gain different kinds of knowledge by active exploring, practicing and doing, some even without knowing in advance. For instance, we got to know open fire is hot by getting close to it, we learnt riding a bicycle by practicing but without knowing how the bicycle works. However it can be problematic only to act after knowing because today we live in a world which is characterised by constant and rapid change and reaction times are cut short. What students can do, particularly when they entered the workplace, and their ability to deal with complex and often ambiguous information will be more important than simply knowing a lot of facts or having an accumulation of knowledge (Frand, 2000). What has been emphasized in Confucian philosophy is that action without knowledge is blind and erroneous. I would argue that this is still valuable in regarding how knowledge can provide guide to our action. But there should be a two-way process between knowing and doing: we learn

through understanding concepts as well as active exploring and practicing. Obtaining knowledge should not be an end itself but should lead to employing it to improve the practice in a real world.

- *Teaching and Learning*

To Confucius, learning is a self-development process under guidance and is a cooperative process between teacher and learner. Teaching and learning go hand in hand to contribute to each other (Cheng, 1952). The vital part of this process, however, lies with the learner. Confucius said:

I won't teach a man who is not anxious to learn, and will not explain to one who is not trying to make things clear to himself. If I hold one corner of a square and a man cannot come back to me with the other three, I won't bother to go over the point again.

(The Analects, VII:8)

This was echoed by Mencius: "A carpenter or a carriage-maker may give a man the circle and square, but cannot make him skilful in the use of them." Therefore, "the Jun-zi advances in learning with deep earnestness and on the proper course, wishing to get hold of it as himself" (Mencius, collected by Legge, 1933:356).

Confucius listed four points in effective teaching:

The rules aimed at in the Great College were the prevention of evil before it was manifested; the timeliness of instruction just when it was required; the suitability of the lessons in adaptation to circumstances; and the good influence of example to parties observing one another. It was from these four things that the teaching was so effectual and flourishing (Muller, 1885:86)

Therefore, the teacher is to provide the proper environment for the learner to develop; give instruction when it is needed; adjust the learning content according to learners' needs and set up himself/herself as an example. Confucius would not instruct until someone was eager to learn but encountered difficulty, would not enlighten until someone wanted to speak out but failed to express himself (The Analects, VII:8). Confucius advocated adjusting the teaching method according to individual differences, which was evident in his answers of 'yes' and 'no' to the same question from two different disciples each of whom had asked him whether they should immediately put his teaching into practice. Questioned on this inconsistency Confucius replies: "Ch'iu…lags behind, so I urged him forward; but Yu has energy for two men, so I held him back" (The Analects, XI:22). Therefore, the most devoted of his disciples, Yan Yuan, spoke admiringly of his teaching technique which "by orderly method, skillfully leads men forwards" (The Analects, IX:11). It is interesting to note that his teaching method is not in striking contrast with that of Socrates, as some authors have believed (e.g. Tweed & Lehman, 2002). As Biggs (1991, p.30) notes, "his (*Confucius'*) methods were individual and Socratic, not expository."

Giving the moral nature of education, Confucius emphasizes the influence of the example in teaching. The word 'xue', which is translated as 'learning' or 'to study' often means the study and imitation of moral exemplars and the main object of learning was the imitation of models. "[A]n important part of a teacher's role was to act as a model himself and to provide an example of what the morally conscious human being should be like" (Dawson, 1981:11). Said Confucius, "When we see a man of virtue and talent, we should think of equaling him; when we see a man of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves" (The Analects, IV:17). But the model or example does not only exist in the past. Confucius commented, "When three

are walking together, I am sure to find teachers among them. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them."

However, this is not to say that Confucius maintained that learners should imitate examples and obey authority blindly. As he said, "When it comes to the practice of humanity, one should not defer even to his teacher" (The Analects, XV:36). He despised those who agree blindly with others: "The Jun-zi is conciliatory but not blind-accommodating; the small man is blind-accommodating but not conciliatory" (The Analects, XIII:23). A man with great wisdom was seen as one who "loved to question others and to examine their words" (The Doctrine of the Mean, 6, collected by Chan, 1963:99). Confucius himself was open to debate with students and actually desired his students to criticize his statements: "Hui (one of Confucius disciples) is not the one who can help me. No words I say but delights him" (The Analects, XI:4). And "I talked to Hui for a whole day without his ever differing from me. He seems to be stupid. But when he is not with me I examine his conduct and find he is able to illustrate my teaching. He is by no means stupid" (The Analects, II:9).

In sum, the learning process in the Confucian philosophical tradition is a dynamic, meaningful and purposeful process, which comprises memorising, thinking, reflecting, creating, knowing and doing. They do not differ in nature but contribute to each other in development throughout the learning process. To reach a holistic understanding of the learning approaches depicted here, it is necessary to bear in mind the moral nature of education in this tradition, where the nature of 'knowledge' is not in the exactly same vein as that in the Western tradition.

In the following section we examine the evidence in the literature on how these

beliefs and ideologies have been manifested in their influences on contemporary education practice.

2.2 The Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) Learning Environment

By the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) learning environment we refer to those learning environments to be found in countries mainly under the influence of Confucian philosophical tradition – such as mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and South Korea. The literature selected, however, is mainly that examining Chinese learners.

2.2.1 Motivations and Value of Effort

Belief in the personal and social importance of education in the Confucian tradition has influenced orientations towards education and learning in contemporary CHC learning environments, as well as other socialisation processes and educational structures.

In Western psychological textbooks, a distinction is made between 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' motivation - studying solely to achieve material rewards or through interest in knowledge itself. However, "western ways of categorizing motivation might not travel well to the East (Watkins and Biggs, 1996). The concept of motivation for Chinese learners is found seemingly not to hinge on this contrast between the extrinsic and the intrinsic (Kember, 2000, Li, 2004) but more as the two in a form of co-existence (Salili, Chiu, & Lai, 2001; Volet & Renshaw, 1996). The importance of examinations and academic success for career enhancement in Chinese culture and reality has driven generations of Chinese to study for a better future (Lee, 1996). However, it is very often accompanied by learning-related goals. Studies have found a substantial

proportion of students in the Chinese context are motivated both by the prospect of a good job and by an interest in the course material itself. For instance, in an extensive series of interviews with Hong Kong students, Kember, Wong and Leung (1999) found students made positive comments about career preparation and career relevance of their course. This motivation seemed to stimulate interest in them to work harder, which implies an intrinsic element to the motivation. The students wanted their course both to be interesting and to provide an appropriate preparation for their future career.

Moreover, it is found that CHC learners commonly show a high level of achievement motivation, in that they wish to perform better in learning. However, it is argued that the achievement motivation displayed by students from a CHC learning environment might also not coincide with the concept as conventionally given in Western literature:

> Achieving motive is based on competition and ego-enhancement: obtain highest grades, whether or not material is interesting.

> (Biggs,1987:11)

Rather, it has a more collective nature (Ho, 1986; Salili, 1996; Kember, 2000, Bond, 1986). Salili (1996) argues that the collectivist culture in China exerts considerable influence on students' achievement motivation, where they see that success and failure are not just a personal matter but as 'repayment' or loyalty to the family and even to society as a whole. Moreover, the collective nature of the achievement evidenced in Chinese learners also accords with observations of high levels of out-of-class learning in groups and good performance in group projects, as studies discussed below have shown.

In a study based in Hong Kong, Yan (1996) found students engaged in a wide range of activities that involved talking in groups. These included sharing material; sharing assignments and working out likely examination questions together; and achieving a better understanding of the course material, helping each other understand difficult points and discussing how to approach questions. Students have been found working effectively in team-based project work (Ho and Crookall, 1995). Similarly, Tang (1996) found Hong Kong students spontaneously collaborated to study outside the tertiary classroom and that small group work involving collaboration and cooperation seemed to be a natural way to structure learning among ethnic Chinese learners. Moreover, there is tendency for the collaborating students to exhibit better performance and deeper learning approaches than those studying individually. Learning in such groups goes beyond knowledge transfer and students "become aware of different perspectives on controversial issues, form judgements through critical thinking…rehearse, organize and clarify information in order to be able to communicate with the other members" (Tang, 1996:185).

In addition to this, belief in the value of effort also has influenced learners' achievement motivation. Contemporary Chinese tend to believe that achievement is determined more by effort than by inherent ability (Heine et al, 2001; Hau & Salili, 1991). Since the 'inner self' is seen to be improvable and changeable, with effort and self-discipline every person can achieve his or her goals, as the "sage" advocated in Confucianism. Such belief is seen as an important foundation for motivation because personal effort is more within the control of the individual students than is ability (Dickinson, 1995). It explains the positive reaction towards failure taken by some Chinese students, namely one of putting in more effort and persistence. Some authors refer to such behaviour as being among the "learning virtues", which include diligence, persistence, endurance of hardship, and concentration (Li, 2003). "Learning virtues" are

seen as Chinese learners' personal dispositions that are not linked to a specific task but are internal qualities of the learners that he or she can apply to any learning task (Li, 2003, 2004).

2.2.2 The Approaches to Learning

Different orientations towards education might lead to the different learning approaches being employed. Marton and Saljo (1976) first made the distinction between "deep" and "surface" learning approaches. The former is associated with learning for deep understanding while surface learning tends to be instrumental in nature. However, the application of such concepts to the CHC learning environment should remain in doubt.

For some, the "examination culture" culture designed for governance purposes is considered possibly to have a far greater impact on achievement orientation than Confucianism in a CHC learning environment (Wong, 2004). Such examinations, Pratt (1991) argues, promote surface learning – the ability merely to repeat information without a real understanding of meaning or of how the new information relates to previous knowledge - and thus act as a barrier to creative expression, critical thinking and problem-solving in education. Thus some argue that even though Chinese students do better than Western students in mathematics and sciences, they are not known for their creativity and original thinking (e.g. Salili, 1996).

As discussed previously, the ideologies of Confucianism itself nurture goals that go far beyond crossing examination hurdles and getting a place in the official hierarchy. A concern for self-improvement leads to a tendency to promote deep-learning. There is no lack of research revealing Chinese learners' tendency to adopt deep learning approaches (e.g. Biggs, 1990, 1991, 1994; Chan & Watkins, 1994; Kember & Gow, 1991); or to employ aspects of both

deep and surface learning, depending upon the nature of the assignment or learning task (Kember and Gow, 1991). As in the West, a surface approach will be adopted if students perceive it to meet course and assessment requirements. However, the complexity involved in interpreting these findings has also evoked some questioning of the possibility of employing the Western concepts of "deep" and "surface" approach in different cultural traditions (Tweed and Lehman, 2002).

More importantly, it is even more flawed to attribute a certain approach to a fixed, culturally determined disposition of learners. Diversity within a single culture is the rule rather than the exception (Li, 2004). Considerable evidence can be traced to show adaptability and flexibility in the learning approach that Chinese learners display: they are quite capable of responding actively to some teaching innovations that are fresh to them, given appropriate time and support (Kember, 2000; Gieve and Clark, 2005; Volet and Renshaw, 1996). Hills (1998) found that Hong Kong adult distance learners adapted successfully to the demands of independent study; students showed strong desires to participate in classroom activities and a preference for a student-centred style of learning (Liu & Littlewood, 1997; Cheng, 2000; Wong, 2004).

2.2.3 CHC Classroom Settings

Biggs describes the features of CHC classes as being "typically large, usually over 40, and appear to Western observers as highly authoritarian; teaching methods appear as mostly expository, sharply focused on preparation for external examinations. Examinations themselves address low level cognitive goals, are highly competitive, and exert excessive pressure on teachers and students" (1994:22, see also Biggs, 1991). This apparently unfavourable learning environment is, however, associated with successful educational outcomes of Chinese learners in some domains – a phenomenon termed the

Chinese "learning paradox" – and has attracted research seeking to draw some new insights into it.

- Interaction & Relationship between Teacher & Student

In any culture, teacher-student interaction is influenced by the norms of behaviour, values, and beliefs that exist in that culture (Salili et al, 2001). Some Western scholars observe that teachers in typical Chinese schools are considered to be authorities and of superior status, while students are taught to respect, obey, listen, and follow their instruction, and not to challenge them (e.g. Tweed & Lehman, 2000). Questioning the teacher in public can be perceived as a sign of disrespect. As a result, teacher-centred pedagogy and student compliance are still prevalent in many modern Chinese societies (Ho, 2001; Liu and Littlewood,1997). On the other hand, some practitioners have also noticed that students can be very critical of their teachers and have very clear expectations of the roles of the teacher (e.g. Marton et al., 1997). It is suggested that the overt acceptance of the teacher's authority may be due to the constraints of the situation rather than to the internalized recognition of authority that it is often taken to be (Littlewood, 1999). Moreover, much research has also found out that despite the relatively infrequent interaction and lack of response to the teacher in the classroom, there was much teacher-student interaction outside the classroom, with a lot of informal discussions and collective activities (e.g. Biggs, 1994; Gao & Watkins, 2001).

Such paradox can be explained as follows:
(1) In the context of education, Chinese teachers exercising authority over students is seen as appropriate since this primarily reflects care for and nurture of the student (Ho, 2001). In the formal class situation, a more formal and hierarchical relationship is in operation, which enables the teacher to be authoritarian and thus facilitates the teaching and learning process, although

the teacher's adoption of an authoritarian position may influence the nature of the learning that takes place.

(2) CHC teachers were found to bear a moral responsibility of caring for their students and an implicit influence exists behind the façade of the transmission of knowledge (Ho, 2001; Gao & Watkins, 2001). The relationship is also marked by a sense of responsibility on both sides. Chinese teachers aim to combine '*jiao shu*' (literally, teaching the book, or giving the knowledge) with '*yu ren*' (cultivating the person) and both these Chinese terms translate the English word 'education'. Therefore, teachers from CHC spend much more time with their students outside formal teaching compared with their Western counterparts.

(3) The moral standard of a 'good student' includes showing politeness and good manners. Chinese students clearly give great attention and respect to teachers, and sometimes take them as a moral model to imitate (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). Li (2003) held that under the influence of Confucian philosophy, humility is believed to lead to better learning. This belief may also lead East Asians to be self-effacing, a behavioral tendency often taken as a sign of obedience but which should not in fact be equated to it.

Thus, the CHC classroom may be characterized as 'both teacher-led and student-centred'. Some Western observers of teaching in China have used a 'constructivist approach' to describe their findings: the teachers are said to be uniformly student-centred, frequently engaging all students collectively in problem-solving, both in the cognitive sense and in determining a course of action for deviant students, and pushing for high cognitive level thought processes (O'Connor, quoted by Biggs, 1996). In their study of observing the real class events in mainland China, Jin and Cortazzi found that while both Western and Chinese teachers use I (initiation)-R (response)-F (follow up) cycles with the whole class, distributing each exchange to a different pupil, the

teachers in China also use 'I-R-F-R-F-R-F', extending and modifying the initial question and making sure the whole class learns from these exchanges. Such exchanges function as scaffolding to the learning of the whole class and are internalized in each individual: "the teacher-pupil dialogue is fast-paced, disciplined, full of repetition yet with much variety and quick changes of activity…the rapid response and high participation makes such lessons highly efficient" (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998:756). Therefore, teaching does remain strongly participative. Individual difference is catered more often after the class while keeping the majority within the same learning zone. Consistent with this, Hess and Azyma (1991) notice that despite the large size of the class teachers find time to interact one-to-one, quite often with each student in their classroom rounds. By contrast, Western teachers see interaction more in whole class terms, with 'quick and snappy' public questioning, which may do little to contribute higher order cognitive engagement. Students in China are socialized and educated into a certain 'discipline' – when to talk, when to do seated work, when and how to raise questions, etc. One can envisage that without such discipline, it is impossible to realize this kind of 'fast-paced' knowledge transmission and construction in a large class. These findings may have evoked academics and practitioners to rethink the relationship between certain classroom discourses and the fostering of knowledge.

- ***The 'listening culture' in the classroom***

Students from CHC learning environments have been observed to be 'passive' learners due to the fact that they tend to be 'quiet' - reluctant to raise questions in class and participate in the classroom discussions. Some explain this in terms of students from East Asian cultures being more sensitized to perceive and accept 'power distance' (Hofstede,1984) in classroom settings and thus more likely to withhold questions that threaten such power distance (Tweed &

Lehman, 2002). Such an explanation turns out to be too simple if the phenomenon is examined more carefully.

"Listening to teacher" has been the most frequent classroom experience for most Chinese students due to their past learning experience (Liu and Littlewood, 1997). Several reasons have been suggested, such as being afraid of losing face if a wrong answer is given, avoiding showing off in class or disturbing the class or wasting other students' time. However, it is argued that not speaking out should not be seen as indicating a lack of engagement and passivity (Li, 2003, Jin & Cortazzi, 1998) and teaching is very participative in the CHC classroom setting as pointed above. Jin and Cortazzi found in this listener-orientated culture, learners actually paid close attention to the talking and exchanges between teacher and other students. "Some will subvocalize, mouthing what others say; others will clearly be rehearsing mentally: predicting questions, preparing answers or repeating comments" (1998:745). Therefore, Jin and Cortazzi (1998) argue that learners are actually actively engaging in the classroom teaching and they tend to ask questions after the classroom and seek one-to-one help from the teachers. They believe that the more worthwhile question is asked on the basis of knowledge. The interview comments from Chinese students in Britain quoted in Jin and Cortazzi's study exemplified this: "Often those classmates ask superficial questions. We don't want to ask these silly questions." "The British students are so rude. They keep asking questions in class. We…have to prepare questions in advance so that we are ready to ask them." (1998:753). Researchers conclude that the Chinese ask after knowing while the British know by asking. As indicated previously, there is no lack of spirit of questioning and criticism in Confucian philosophy of education; enquiry and questioning are advocated as an important route to knowing. It is possible that Chinese students are not only asking for confirmation after knowing (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998), but asking in order to know more and know in depth after

knowing some basics. This is also in line with the discouragement of action without preparation in Confucian tradition.

Similarly, Lee (1999) has found in his study that tertiary students from Hong Kong prefer to have adequate preparation before a tutorial discussion, such as reading reference materials or revising lecture notes. Two other important reasons given for non-participation in tutorials by interviewed students are the influence of the teacher and their acquaintance with other group members. A tutor was expected to stimulate and participate in discussion, to act as a guide, a navigator and a facilitator, make sure students are on the right track, and explain anything students do not understand, instead of just giving answers and encouraging students to raise new questions. Moreover, students showed their preference for discussion with someone whom they know, which gave them a sense of security to express their opinions. Based on a qualitative study of Chinese students' experience in classroom settings in Canadian academic institutions, Zhou et al (2005) have reinforced the findings from above. The authors argue that the non-participation of Chinese students in classroom is due to their different understandings of class participation, which were largely influenced by their previous cultural and pedagogical experience in China. The students felt that they take class 'very seriously' while their local counterparts seemed to behave casually in class. As a consequence, Chinese students tend to consider carefully their ideas/questions and the reactions they might evoke before they spoke out. In addition, personal familiarity with peer students in class, the knowledge of the education context, including pedagogy employed as well as the Canadian/Western culture, were identified as important elements that could inhibit or facilitate their classroom participation. "[F]amiliarity with peer students may increase trust, motivation and feelings of comfort and safety in the classroom" (Zhou et al, 2005:297). Bond's (1991) description of Chinese social behaviour appears consistent with these findings where he argues

Chinese make a clear distinction between established acquaintances and others and tend to communicate with people whom they know and within their circles of acquaintances. However, the question remains whether the tendency is unique among *Chinese* students. The literature suggests that it is crucially important to provide support to alleviate anxiety as well as a sense of isolation and increase students' self-confidence and sense of safety when they are working in a new educational environment.

- *Self-directness and learners' autonomy in the learning process*

It is believed that freedom of choice for students leads to higher intrinsic motivation and better learning outcomes. Based on a comparison of the Socratic and Confucian cultural traditions, Tweed and Lehman (2002) suggest that culturally Western students tend to feel a greater need for self-direction in academic tasks and learners can progress even without a guide. While culturally Chinese learners will need a competent teacher to guide them and believed that acquiring ideas from authorities is a better way of learning than seeking ideas individually (also see Iyengar et al., 1999). However, the endorsement of such claims should be made with caution as they are not based on sound empirical findings.

A definition of 'learner autonomy' offered by Dam (1995: 1) is found useful here:

Learning autonomy is characterized by a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person.

As McGrath et al (2007) point out, in this definition, learner autonomy is understood as a construct of *capacity* – the ability to make informed decisions

about one's own learning, rather than the pure freedom of action. From this perspective, it can be argued that reflexive learning has an important role to play here - "to enable students to make more knowledgeable decisions in a world of rapidly changing and often contradictory information" (Dyke, forthcoming).

Ryan (1991) points out two fundamental needs and purposes of human beings: one is the achievement of a sense of autonomy and the other is 'relatedness' – 'contact, support and community with others'. This echoes with the concept of '*Ren*' in Confucian philosophy as discussed before. According to him, autonomy and relatedness do not stand in opposition to each other but, on the contrary, autonomy develops most effectively in an interpersonal environment which supports it. Little similarly argues that 'learner autonomy is the product of interdependence rather than independence" (Little, 1994:435). Therefore, it is suspected that the strong attachment of members of East Asian cultures to their peers in the same groups and the importance they attach to mutual support and harmony within these groups could provide ideal interpersonal environments for the development of the capacity for self-regulation (Littlewood, 1999).

Studies showed that students from CHC learning environments have shown high levels of autonomy when they are engaged in group-based forms of learning, as the studies quoted previously indicated (e.g. Ho and Crookall, 1995; Tang, 1996); and they have shown considerable awareness of the need to be autonomous in their learning (Gieve and Clark, 2005). Therefore, the appearance of being passive and reticent in the whole-classroom setting may be due to the emphasis on authority and control associated with the roles of parents and teachers within East Asian families and educational traditions, where students are left with few choices and opportunities to develop proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999).

2.3 Summary

This chapter has explored the nature and processes of human learning in the Chinese philosophical tradition of Confucianism, in recognition of its tremendous influence on the development of education in China. Education is evidently significant from both individual and social perspectives. Learning is a process of becoming a genuine, sincere person with moral perfection, which could be closely linked to the idea of education as growth from the Western philosopher, John Dewey. Learning, therefore, is understood as a whole person constructing and transforming his/her life experience. Practice, however, lies at the heart of this process. For Confucius, learning is a process of constantly practicing *Ren* (benevolence); for Dewey, experience is continuous and interactive. The significance of action in the learning process in the Confucian educational tradition also gives it a close connection with some Western thinkers, such as Archer, who claims the centrality of practice in the emergence and development of our sense of self and all forms of knowledge.

There is no evidence in the Confucian philosophy of education that learning is a passive, bookish process; there is no lack of the spirit of thinking, questioning and reflection in this tradition. "Pure thinking", arbitrary decision-making and creativity or immature criticism were not advocated as being conducive to effective learning. Instead, intensive reading and proper understanding were seen as the appropriate preparation leading to criticism and creation; while knowing the basic skills was the prerequisite to higher order cognition. Memory is an important strategy employed to achieve deep understanding, which should not being equated with rote-learning, in Western terms. This learning path is seen as inflexible from many Western thinkers' point of view; it does, however, highlight the differences that exist in the structure and organization of learning

in the different traditions and thus different routes contributing to effective learning.

There is evidence that contemporary Chinese do share some beliefs in education and learning linked to their philosophical and cultural traditions to various extents; for instance, a great faith in learning and education in both personal development and contributing to society; a collective-oriented achievement motivation; an emphasis on effort and persistence in the learning process; a belief in basic skill perfection before conducting higher-order cognitive learning tasks. However, there is a thin line between the construction of a stereotype and discerning the distinctive features of a certain culture, as some of the research reviewed has shown. Firstly, the tendencies that learners, as members of a certain culture, might act in certain ways are easily interpreted as being more robust and resilient than might in fact be the case. When learners are treated individually, the variety of practice is more likely to be found and emphasized within a single culture-bounded population. As some have noted, "Chinese learning styles are more subtle and complex than they are often made out to be" (Kennedy, 2002:442). This is not surprising given the fact that the Chinese are as culturally complex as any other people. The adaptability and flexibility showed by Chinese students in coping with new learning environments, as revealed in the review, also cast into question the validity of any claims of this kind. Thus, it is a pitfall to submerge individual differences into the 'average' orientation that emerges from whole cultural populations (Littlewood, 1999). Secondly, much cross cultural research is found to conduct its discussion around polar distinctions – the East versus the West, Socratic tradition versus Confucian tradition, etc. This is understandable when the intention is to recognise the distinctive features in a particular culture, with its manifested influences on learning. On the other hand, it can be misleading when inter-cultural contrasts become exaggerated; the above review has

shown that in fact there is much commonality to be found across cultural boundaries. In other words, apparent cultural differences might be reduced or even removed when the teaching and learning experience is re-arranged in a distinctive way. The review calls attention to the need to document the actual teaching and learning settings where learning takes place and take the broad social context into account. And finally, questions remain about continuity of the influence of philosophical traditions in the shaping of modern education practice, given the changing forces of globalization in this post-modern era.

It is also been found that many terms used in the West can not be simply adopted to measure or describe the Chinese learners' learning phenomena, such as the division between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, the concept of achievement motivation, deep and surface learning approaches. This suggests that a given form of learning activity may mean something completely different in another cultural and educational system and misunderstanding can emerge if the phenomenon is not examined further and with adequate care. For instance, skill perfection and the acquisition of basics are seen as a necessary grounding for understanding and creativity, which involve early investment in practice and repetition. Such approaches, however, are easily misjudged as mechanical learning. Again, an aspiration to better job prospects from learning is very often harshly seen as extrinsic motivation, while its combination with an interest in knowledge itself has been ignored; the Chinese students' reticence in the classroom is seen as 'passive' while the active mental activity that is going on is overlooked; the classroom appears teacher-centred and the relationship between teacher and student is formal and hierarchical, while different classroom discourses conducive to the fostering of knowledge have not been properly understood and contribution of the warm and informal teacher-student relationship outside the classroom to students' learning is downplayed. All these are suggesting that any discrete learning preferences or behaviours must be

understood by locating them within the larger social and cultural system in which the learning is conducted.

The ignorance of contextual influences on acts is known as the 'Fundamental Attribution Error' – "People tend to attribute behavior to the object rather than to the field, even when it is obvious (to the psychologist at least) that the behavior is produced, or at least heavily influenced, by some contextual or situational factor" (Ross, 1977, cited by Ji, et al, 2000:944). Unfortunately, most documented research has focused mainly on "inherent characteristics" of Chinese learners rather than the teaching and learning setting itself. It remains unclear how a particular learning design with associated resources can foster certain forms of intellectual interaction or constrain others. Thus, although the flexibility and adaptability of Chinese learners has been demonstrated, the question remains as to how they cope with learning tasks when they encounter new modes of educational practice, for example, in an e-learning environment. This is the main issue to be addressed in this research.

In brief, the review in this chapter has highlighted the significance of social and cultural contexts in influencing learning and our understanding towards it. How these issues have been tackled in Western learning theories is the task for the review in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Learners, Technologies and Contexts

The attempt in the previous chapter to recognize the distinctive features of learning in Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions and their manifestation in contemporary educational practice is a natural context within which to start understanding Chinese e-learners' learning experience. The chapter revealed how learning has been understood in Chinese philosophical tradition and highlighted the significant role of meta-context (socio-cultural) in influencing learning combined with effects from the micro-context (institutional and learning settings). The nature of learning and the process of coming to learn are also the issues that have been explored from different perspectives over centuries of Western learning theorization. Any particular pedagogical design employed in e-learning environments has underlying stance(s) on the nature of learning and the role of technology, which relates to these different understandings and perspectives. Thus, to understand the influence of the e-learning environment on learners' learning experiences and to address the second research sub-question, these different schools of thoughts on learning must be well-understood. Moreover, it is expected that a review of Western learning theories will help to achieve a better understanding of the nature of human learning in general, by comparison with the previous account of the Chinese philosophical tradition. Thus the socio-cultural influence may become highlighted, as the central research question aims to address. This part of the literature review is therefore set out for this task first: learning theories are discussed to disclose their underlying assumptions made of the nature of learning, as well as their implications for e-learning design. In addition, debates on 'structure' and 'agency' from critical realist social theory are introduced in

order to approach a powerful perspective for examining the interplay between agent and structure in an e-learning environment; and finally, the e-learners' experiences in interacting with their e-learning environments reported mainly from learners' perspectives will be examined.

3.1 Perspectives from the basic learning theories

Although there are different groupings of the various learning theories that have been produced over the years, the three broad categories given by Mayes and Freitas, (2004) are found useful here: associative, cognitive and situative. The review here is by no means an attempt comprehensively to summarize different schools but aims to explore the understanding of learning through these perspectives, particularly their theoretical underpinnings and implicit statements of the human condition: the nature of individual learners and their relations to context, as well as their relevance and implications to e-learning design.

3.1.1 An associative (behaviourist) perspective

In this perspective, a learning outcome is required to be specified as a behavioural objective because, according to a classical behaviourist definition given by Borger and Seaborne (1966, cited by Gagné and Driscoll, 1988), learning is 'any more or less permanent change in behaviour' brought about through the formation, strengthening and adjustment of associations. Desired effects will be encouraged by rewards and the opposite effects will be minimized by punishments through manipulating the conditions and circumstances (Skinner, 1954).

This approach is widely criticized and dismissed as ineffective educational theorizing, for its ignorance of the rich inner world of the learners and the social meaning of learning (e.g. Ravenscroft, 2000; Dyke, et al, 2007). Because

human beings are postulated from this perspective as being rational individuals whose behaviour can be predicted (Oliver, et al, 2007), the interactions between human beings and the environment are expected to be open to investigation by strict rules and procedures, as those adopted in the laboratory settings.

It is argued that early applications of technology for learning were characterised by the adoption of behaviourist ideas about the development of 'teaching machines,' using Skinner's (1954) notion of operant conditioning and programmed instruction. The emphasis was on designing an environment that shaped behaviour through learner-system interactions (Dyke et al. 2007). It has been found that a large proportion of existing e-learning models and tools are also derived from this perspective (Conole et. al., 2005). Mayes & Freitas (2004) also observe that much of what is termed e-learning is still based in the training departments of organisations, within a training philosophy, which derives from the behaviourist perspective. These learning environments are characterised as content-driven, with information presented in brief chunks, followed by questions and immediate feedback that reinforces correct responses (Ravenscroft, 2000). The focus of the design is on tracking learners' progress through the content. Robert Gagne's (1968) learning hierarchies set out the psychological principles for such instructional system design (ISD) (Ravenscroft, 2000; Oliver et al, 2007)– competence in advanced and complex tasks is built step by step from simpler units of knowledge and skill, finally adding coordination to the whole structure. However, Gagne's bottom-up model has been challenged by much empirical evidence, which led him to conclude that learning hierarchies only fully apply to a particular class of learning outcome, such as mastery of basic skills and concepts.

On the other hand, arguably, there is a tendency for Chinese learners to strive

first to 'know the basics' after which there is something to be creative with, as some evidence showed in the previous chapter (e.g. Biggs, 1996, Wong, 2004, Tweed and Lehman, 2002). I would argue that these 'basics' are essential, which should include the development of skills of all kinds that are needed for learning, let alone the understanding the texts through repetitive practice. Therefore, Behaviourism might find its place here to develop these basic skills by emphasizing active learning-by-doing with immediate feedback on success and the careful analysis of learning outcomes (Mayes & Freitas, 2004).

Nevertheless, given the shortcomings of the approaches discussed above, it would be a problem if this were to become the dominant paradigm or the inherent architecture of the learning environment (Dyke et al. 2007). Indeed, the contemporary challenges of globalisation and the knowledge economy are often interpreted as demanding the cultivation of greater creativity, imagination and personal autonomy. It can be argued that this is antithetical to an approach to education that tries to specify learning outcomes precisely. In an era that encourages lifelong, self-motivated learning as a necessary capacity for individual survival in the face of rapid and unpredictable socio-economic change, we might also challenge the appropriateness of a model of learning that depends so much on the existence of external provision of reward and punishment, in the way that crude behaviourist models do. At the very least, we would demand that reinforcement be reconceived in terms of rewards such as personal satisfaction of the learner, or that the idea of delayed reinforcement, through longer term rewards to study be introduced into the behaviourist model. Both of these would certainly take us a long way from the simpler versions of the theory.

3.1.2 A cognitive perspective (cognitive constructivist and social constructivist)

Greater concern over the nature and the inner world of the individual learner appears in cognitive perspectives of learning. One of the most influential early cognitive theorists, Piaget (1929), postulated a model which presents the idea that cognition is one form of the adaptation between organism and environment and that 'adaptation' in cognition proceeds by means of 'assimilation' - relating new information to pre-existing structures of knowledge and understanding - and 'accommodation' - by developing the old structures into new ones (Piaget, 1971). Here, individuals are considered as biological organisms with a long evolutionary history which has led us to have a brain which has adapted to function in particular ways and leads to particular cognitive activities, just as we have evolved lungs, livers and a thumb articulated with fingers so that fine grasping is possible (Meadow, 2004). Learning is thus a process of interaction between new experiences and the structures for understanding that have already been created. Learners construct their concepts through active and personal experimentation and observation rather than copying or absorbing ideas from the external world. It is argued that as a reaction against the practice of a transmission-based didactic mode of teaching, this early cognitive perspective has a crucial implication for e-learning: "the presentation of subject matter using multimedia is based on a discredited idea – that more vivid and naturalistic representations of knowledge would lead better learning" (Mayes & Freitas, 2004:15). And much of the disillusionment from computer-based learning in the 1980's and 90's could have resulted from this misconception (Mayes, 1995). Moreover, this perspective of learning gave rise to the assumptions emphasised in the main stream cognitive approach to learning – constructivism - that understanding is gained through an active process of creating hypotheses and building new forms of understanding through activity (Mayes & Freitas, 2004). Oliver et al (2007) argue that this 'position' – constructivism - would be more accurately described as a cluster of related

positions, with some advocating active experimentation (e.g. Papert, 1980) whilst others emphasise social interaction (Vygotsky, 1986, Wenger, 1998).

It would be hard to deny that human thought has rules, legitimate procedures and hierarchies of concepts. Unlike machines, however, we are not completely bound by these structures. Because the intimate relations between learners and their context are missing, Piaget's five-stage mental development is seen as abstract, content-free reasoning. As Meadows comments,

> (Rate) varies between cultures, degree of schooling and less formal educational experience being one of the main relevant variables. The role of social and environmental experience in cognitive development is an important issue which needs more investigation than the main stream of Piagetian thought provided.

(Meadows ,2004:144)

Thus socio-cultural constructivism (derived from the Vygotskian approach) can be seen as distinguishing itself from cognitive constructivism (derived from this Piagetian tradition) over this concern (Duffy and Cunningham, 1986).

It was Vygotsky (1978) who introduced the concept of *internalization* to integrate the 'internal' and the 'external' and link to the work of social constructivism. Like all social constructivists, Vygotsky rejected theories of development based on genetically pre-determined stages but founded his theories of development on social interaction. For Vygotsky, development involves a transfer of social patterns of interaction to the individual's mind. He believed that individual learning is mediated by the world and occurs through internalising dialogical activity and its signification systems (i.e. languages) that occur in the social world. Adults can provide a secondary means of mediation or a social scaffold between the child and the world so that children can undertake tasks (Vygotsky, 1978:.86). The term *zone of proximal development* (ZPD),

defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978:86) has become part of mainstream pedagogical thinking. In these learning environments, tutors have the main responsibility for providing guidance and support to students to engage with structured interactions. At the same time, tutors themselves need guidance in the scaffolding, particularly in an e-learning environment, where they learn to use and monitor e-mail, discussion forums and other communicative tools to engage students supportively (Mayes & Freitas, 2004).

Moreover, Vygotsky highlights the primacy of language as a tool for learning and the joint construction of knowledge. The primacy of language in an e-learning setting was reflected in a number of intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) initiatives that modelled and maintained instructional dialogues, such as SHOLAR (Carbonell, 1970) and WHY (Collins, 1977). However, since the focus and the unit of analysis is still the individual learner, structural, institutional and cultural factors are thought to be often neglected (Dyke et al, 2007).

Nevertheless, the socio-constructivist approach has evidently become a popular theoretical basis for learning technology design over the last decades (Jones & Mercer, 1993) and many e-learning developments in HEIs have been based on social constructivist approaches (Thorpe, 2002; McConnell, 2000). Different emphases within this camp were evidenced in different e-learning models, such as Salmon's e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) and DialogPlus（Conole and Fill, 2005）, which focused on group tasks and discussions. Learning technologies, such as synchronous and/or asynchronous communication tools are believed to have the potential to promote deeper learning by providing more diverse and richer forms of dialogue and interaction between students and

tutors and amongst peers (Laurillard, 1994; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; McCormick & Scrimshaw, 2001). Purposeful collaboration between individuals, the use of authentic tasks and increased opportunities for reflection are essential to any educational experience from this approach (Jonassen, 1994).

3.1.3 A situated (sociocultural) perspective

Sociocultural psychology is the most recent in a long history of attempts to study culture and psychology together (Cole, 1996). Connected both with various strands of 20th-century Marxian social theory and the pragmatism of Dewey and Mead, two fundamental theoretical assumptions of socioculturalism can be traced: a *process ontology* of the social world; and the *inseparability* of individual and social levels of analysis (Sawyer, 2002).

By rejecting traditional views of learning in which the learner is presumed to internalize knowledge presented from the external world, socioculturalists maintain the inseparability of the individual and context: the individual learner is situated in the social and cultural context and thus cannot be meaningfully separated from it. Rogoff advances a strong 'mutual constitution' view in this inseparability: "The child and the social world are mutually involved to an extent that precludes regarding them as independently definable" (Rogoff, 1990:28). A similar stance is adopted by Lave and Wenger: "Agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (Lave and Wenger 1991:33). The boundary between individual and context disappears; the individual acting 'in' a context or being 'influenced by' the context are both dismissed because such relations imply the separability of individual and situation. Thus it is not the individuals and structures that exist as entities but the processes. The appropriate unit of analysis is situated social practice and events rather than the bounded individual.

Therefore, learning is not the property of the individual participant but becomes that of the group (Hutchins, 1995), that of the "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) through social co-participation, social engagement and the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performances.

Implied by this process ontology is that the structuring of activity is not something that precedes the activity itself but can only grow directly out of the immediacy of the situation (Suchman, 1987; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The emergence and solution of a real problem only occur when the problem is experienced in a real setting. Therefore, situated action emphasizes responsiveness to the environment and the improvisatory nature of human activity (Lave, 1988). Objects and plans, from a situated learning perspective, are "retrospective reconstructions," post hoc "artefacts of reasoning about action", rather than "the generative mechanism" after action has taken place within the immediacy of a given situation (Suchman, 1987). This perspective invites us to take careful notice of what people are actually doing in the flux of real activity at the *moment*, not just depending on rigidly conceived notions of inflexible plans and goal.

However, because of the emergent, improvisatory and contingent nature of the activities produced, situated learning models have been questioned to account for observed regularities and durable, stable phenomena that span individual situations. It is seen as difficult to go beyond the particularities of the immediate situation for purposes of generalization and comparison in the situated learning model (Nardi, 1996). For Lave and Wenger, "so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances…Knowing a general rule by itself in no way assures that any generality it may carry is enabled in the specific circumstances in which it is relevant" (1991:33-34). This statement is certainly true in the sense that we cannot separate knowledge to be learned from the situations in which it

is used. But does that mean only concrete knowledge from specific situations is worth learning? And that there is no power in some general knowledge to influence human actions? It is certainly not the case when we consider that we all learn from our past experiences, which provide a recipe for individuals to repeat the mistakes of the past (Dyke, forthcoming). As discussed previously, many educational theorists would maintain theory as an important source of learning, such as Usher and Bryant (1989), Jarvis (1987).

More significantly, this inseparability leads to the ignorance of the subjective in situated learning. Since the self does not form without situated social practice, we are prevented from acknowledging that individuals have properties that influence the social practice that they are drawn to and that they can participate in. This problem could be seen from the temporal one-way dimension depicted in the 'community of practice'– from the periphery to the centre, the new comers gaining increased access to the expert performance. Any movement outward and in unexpected directions is missing; for example, questioning of authority, criticism, innovation, initiation of change as well as instability and contradictions of practice. Indeed, if the learner is seen as a *whole person* as claimed in the situated learning model, (s)he is bringing his/her own intentions, emotions, motivations, prior educational experiences with him/her to the learning situation. These particularities within the participants might result in different knowledge being valued from different perspectives. Thus, the centre of the community of practice – the expert - becomes an ambiguous figure that it is difficult to define. It is not surprising that movements can have different directions within a community of practice. However, the inseparability of individual and context disallows the examination of such diverse influence because it implies a separation of individual and social reality. Because there is no attempt to catalogue and predict invariant reactions, as situations are said to vary unpredictably, the situated action model is seen as having a slightly

behaviouristic undercurrent in that it focuses on the subject's reaction (a response) to the environment (the "situation"- a stimulus). People "orient to a situation" rather than proactively generating activity rich with meaning reflective of their interests, intentions, and prior knowledge (Nardi, 1996).

Sawyer (2002) argues that these problems have revealed an ontological and epistemological dilemma for those socioculturalists who strongly advocate process ontology and inseparability. As he questioned, since learning is not conceived as a property of the individual any more, whose practice is being analyzed? Which individuals, and in which communities or societies? These questions can not be answered without an analytic identification of distinct entities known as individuals, communities and societies. A process ontology, however, disallows the existence of such entities. Although maintaining the 'mutual constitution' view of context and individual, in empirical practice, however, Rogoff made analytic distinctions between individual, group and community, referring to these as 'perspectives' or 'windows' rather than 'entities' (1990:26). They are not reducible to each other in principle but separated in practice. In their 'community of practice', Lave and Wenger's definition of a person as 'a member of a community of practice' also implies a stratified ontology of entities with individuals being members of larger entities called communities. Their discussion of 'legitimate peripheral practice' has also taken individuals as analyzable entities, who, as "apprentices gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of community" (Lave and Wenger, 1991:95). The socioculturalists who advocate process ontology and inseparability seem to have failed to study socially situated practice without analytically distinguishing among individuals.

Some socioculturalists recognise the difficulties in empirical practice when maintaining a process ontology and epistemological inseparability. Wertsch, for

instance, implicitly criticizes inseparability claims: "[I]f we must take all dimensions of the phenomena into account before we can examine any one of them, it seems that there is no manageable way to 'break into' the cycle of complex issues at hand" (1994:203). Instead, Wertsch accepts analytical dualism: "human action and sociocultural setting are analytically distinct yet inherently interrelated levels of analysis" (1994:203). Although this view is essentially Vygostskian (Sawyer, 2002), the term 'internalisation' is still seen as problematic because it presupposes a "dualism between the external and the internal" (Wertsch, 1993:168). The attempt to unify external and internal is through 'mediated action': all action involves an individual in a social situation using cultural tools, and agency cannot be analytically separated from the mediational means that individuals use in practice (Wertsch, 1993). Individual agency, however, cannot be reduced further than that of "individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means" (Wertsch, 1993:170). The philosophical inspiration for this could have come from John Dewey's pragmatism: "The object of knowledge…is practical in the sense that it depends upon a specific kind of practice for its existence" (Dewey, 1916:334). This is further developed by another important form of socio-cultural theorising – Activity Theory. Influenced by Karl Marx, in that human nature is declared not to be found within the human individual but in the movement between the inside and outside, in the worlds of artefact use and artefact creation, Activity Theory moves the unit of analysis beyond the individual mind to *activity*, or "object-oriented, collective and culturally mediated human activity, or *activity system*" (Cole, & Engeström, 1993). Each activity is a complex system composed of objects, individuals as subjects, and communities. They are bounded together as a systemic whole and their relationships are mediated by tools, rules and division of labour.

Activity Theory thus proposes a very specific notion of context: the activity itself

is the context. What takes place in an activity system, composed of object, actions, and operations, is the context. Context is not a container for a learner, but rather a weaving together of the learner with other people and tools into a web or network of sociocultural interactions and meanings that are integral to the learning (Russell, 2002). It is not just 'out there' any more but internal to people – involving specific objects and goals – and at the same time, external to people, involving specific settings. This can be seen as another version of the 'mutual constitution' view of individual and context. Thus, it can be argued that the examination of the interplay between individual and context can be constrained by this epistemological inseparability embedded in this perspective.

It is argued that the two fundamental theoretical assumptions of socio-culturalism - process ontology and individual-society inseparability - have also been thoroughly developed in Anthony Giddens' *structuration theory* (Sawyer, 2002). For Giddens, "social practice ordered across space and time" (1984:2) is the only ontological realm and not reducible to individual nor to society. Social practices are "crucial mediating moments between the dualism of the individual and society" (Giddens, 1984:4). Thus individual and society cannot be separated ontologically or analytically. Like the conception of context in situated learning and Activity Theory, for Giddens, social structure is not an external constraint on individuals and it exists only in the activities of human agents: "only in its instantiations in [reproduced social] practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents" (1984:17). Sawyer argues that similarity can be found between Giddens' ontology of practice and the socioculturalists' focus on situated or mediated action and events as irreducible units of analysis:

> Both individual and society exist only in instantiated practices, and these social
> practices are the ultimate constituents of social reality. People only become real by

drawing upon structural properties in social practice; structures only become real when instantiated by human action

(Sawyer, 2002:288)

Archer criticizes such a stance as being empirically and theoretically untenable because "'inseparability" precludes just that examination of the interplay between structure and agency upon which practical social theorizing depends' (Archer, 1995:64). Indeed, since there are no such separate entities as individual and society, no causal relation between them can be traced and examined. Structural constraint and enablement are not applicable concepts unless they are constituted outside human agency. "The ontology of praxis constantly comes up against an interface with another level of social reality whose features cannot be construed as practices themselves, their unacknowledged conditions or intended consequences" (Archer, 1995:116). Giddens (1984) rejects social causation and social laws, which maintain that collective entities have lawful causal influences over individuals. Rather, he emphases agents' knowlegeability or *practical consciousness* in choosing available options. However, his ontological underpinning could prevent one from allowing different individuals to have different properties that influence the social practice, since no selfhood is independent of social mediation. This could also lead Giddens to the same pitfall as that of situated learning: the ignorance of subjectivity. As Archer notes: "the focus on social practice prevents us from examining heterogeneous constituents of social life" but only "one homogenous though Janus-faced entity" social practice (Archer, 1995:101).

By reviewing different learning theory schools, one can find differences in the assumptions made about the human condition and the relation between learners and their context, which have resulted in different understandings of the learning process. The implications of three theoretical perspectives to the

design of pedagogical approach are summarized by Mayes & Freitas (2004) as below:

The associative view emphasizes

- Routines of organized activity

- Clear goals and feedback

- Individualised pathways and routines – matched to the individual's prior performance

The cognitive view emphasizes

- Interaction environments for construction of understanding

- Experimentation and the discovery of broad principles

- Support for reflection

The situative view emphasizes

- Environments of participation in social practices of enquiry and learning

- Support for development of identities as capable and confident learners

- Dialogue that facilitates the development of learning relationships

There is an overt recognition of the significant role of context in influencing the learning process in the development of learning theorization. The focus of study has moved from individual behaviour and psychology to social interaction and practice; the unit of analysis has moved from bounded biological organisms, which are independent of context, to 'community of practice' or 'activity system', incorporating both the individual and the social as foundational elements. This trend is also reflected in the shift of e-learning strategy: from a focus on using technology as an individualized, instructional tool to a more discursive and communicative medium (Conole, Smith and White, 2007). The dominance of social constructivism in e-learning design echoes this shift. However, as Mayes & Freitas (2004) suggest, few current e-learning examples are pure derivatives

of the three pedagogical frameworks and most implementations of e-learning in modern HE/FE will include blended elements that emphases all three levels.

It is also interesting to note that although there are different terminologies that have been employed, the understanding of learning from these Western learning theorizations might not contradict those in Chinese traditional philosophy as much as it might appear. The review has revealed many common features of the understanding of good learning across different cultural contexts, such as thinking and reflection, knowing and doing, understanding and questioning.

The significance of relationships between individuals and contexts is most intensified in socio-cultural perspectives. However, as Sawyer (2002) observes, the empirical work could be successful only because they implicitly accept analytic dualism. Analogous to the sociological debates and mainly as a result of those critiques from Margaret Archer of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, the dilemma of sociocultural method is revealed: inseparability allows the transcendence of individual-society dualism but also prevents the analytical examination of these two. Therefore, although the importance of the relationship between learner and context has been recognized, this theorizing has failed to provide a powerful tool to tackle it. These problems call for the necessity of seeing the relationship of learner and context from another perspective.

3.2 Perspectives from Critical Realist Social Theory

The relationship between the individual and the society, structure and agency, subject and object has always been one of the central issues in sociological theory. A brief summary of the theoretical stance and arguments based on the work of the Critical Realist theoretician Margaret Archer (1995, 1996, 2000a,

2000b, 2003，2007) is presented here, with the aim of approaching, from a sociological perspective, a means for understanding the complexities of e-learners within their learning contexts. The discussion will start from the ontological assumption made about reality and its relations to different forms of knowledge.

3.2.1 Three orders of reality

According to Archer (2000a), we, as human beings, necessarily and simultaneously live our lives in three orders of reality: the natural, practical and social. Interestingly, this echoes the assumptions about human nature made by Confucius over two thousands years ago in ancient China as discussed in Chapter 2. However, Confucius did not give a detailed specific account of how human beings' interactions with these different orders of reality result in different forms of knowledge, as Archer does. Archer (2000a) argues that a confluence between our human powers (People's Emergent Property - PEPs) and the powers from these three orders of reality - the physical powers of the natural order, the material affordances and constraints of material culture, and lastly, the logical constraining power of the Cultural System - results in three forms of knowledge: what we can learn to do in nature (embodied knowledge), the skill we can acquire in practice (practical knowledge) or the propositional elaborations we can make in the Cultural System (discursive knowledge).

Embodied knowledge is based upon direct interaction with nature and thus is always context-dependent and entails a personal bodily discovery; it is 'knowing how' knowledge without awareness in cognition and articulation in language. Given the way nature is and the way we are, embodied knowledge is real knowledge because nature supplies feedback on error or rewards our action. It is in a form similar to stimulus-response, trial and error learning in Behaviourist learning theory.
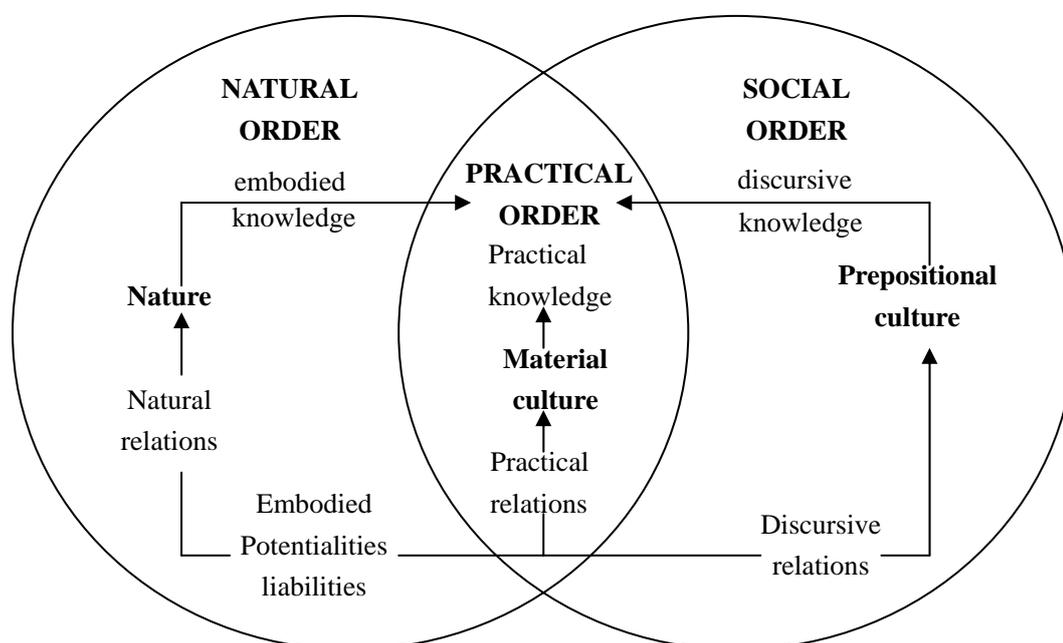
Figure 3.1 Archer's three orders of reality and their respective forms of knowledge (Archer, 2000a:162)

But human learning does not stop here given the distinct human power of reflexivity involved, which makes the extension of our embodied knowledge possible by the invention and use of artefacts. Acquired through an active process of doing in relation to the material culture, practical knowledge is procedural, implicit, tacit and extensive of our bodily power. Again, it is 'knowing how' rather than 'knowing what' knowledge, which is encoded as skills. We can examine some of the applications of Archer's ideas to the study of learning technologies.

There has been a rapid growth of various technologies to support learning and research, and there has been an evident shift from using technology as an individualized, instructional tool to a more discursive and communicative

medium (Conole et al, 2007), such as communication technologies (email, discussion boards, synchronous chat), subject information gateways and integrating learning environments such as Blackboard and WebCT (Conole and Dyke, 2004). A recent detailed review of various tools by their functions in changing practice has been given by Conole (2004). These learning technologies are artefacts of material culture in Archer's categorisation. "[A]rtefacts have a dispositional character for being understood, in and of themselves" (Archer, 2000a:168). Their affordance and constraints can give us cues and clues of how well we are doing and extend what we can do; for instance, the ability to access information is extended by the internet, the ability to communicate and interact with others at a distance is enabled by various synchronous or asynchronous communicative tools. Conole and Dyke (2004) develop a taxonomy of the potential affordances of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on learning, which includes, for example, accessibility, speed of change, diversity, communication and collaboration. The elaboration of these affordances does, certainly, entail a progressive acquisition of skills – computer and internet skills - which constitute practical knowledge over time. However, the skills obtained do not necessary lead to the realization of the potential affordances designed into the artefacts. Archer (2000a) reminds us to be aware of the independence of objective properties of an artifact:

> In a very serious causal sense, material culture 'escapes' its makers. Artifacts become independent of their makers, because practical meanings are carried by the objects themselves and their causal powers are built into them and may have been unrealized, or only partially realized, by their first inventor.
>
> (Archer, 2000a:168)

In another words, artifacts can be used in many ways other than those intended by the designer. It is often found that the technologies are not necessarily being used in the ways course designers or tutors intended, such as in new forms of

plagiarism or changes of power relationships (Conole et al., 2007). Archer (2000a) argues that the functions of material culture also limit the constructions which can be placed upon it (Archer, 2000a:168). In other words, the limit of our practical knowledge also conditions how far this process may go at any given time. The broadness of accessibility of information does not of itself enable the gaining of knowledge by learners and the adoption of any ICT tools in the e-learning courses does not guarantee that real communication occurs in the learning process. Equally, the space or possibility for reflection offered by ICT does not necessarily entail real thinking in effective reflection. Conole and Dyke acknowledge this by saying "there is nothing inherent about ICT that nurtures reflection – the key is how it is used" (2004:118). The fundamental distinction between human beings and learning technologies determines that no learning technology can replace human thinking and 'reflection'.

Acquiring practical knowledge is a matter of apprenticeship which involves higher cognitive content compared with developing embodied knowledge. In her account of how this takes place, Archer (2000a) draws on cognitive psychology, particularly Piaget's two-fold process of assimilation and accommodation: the external environment is assimilated to the existing cognitive structure, which in turn accommodates to novelty in the artefactual environment. The role of the provision of examples in assisting learning is highlighted here:

the key figures who assist in learning are the Mastercraftsman, Instructor and Professional who teach by example, demonstrating good practice and some postural correction, practical criticism and evaluation. What they seek to convey is practical virtuosity, where the 'feel' for the task is virtually incommunicable and thus can only be examined in practice itself

(Archer, 2000a:170)

This implies an important role for introduction in showing how the technologies to be employed in an e-learning course actually work, by setting up examples. This can help decrease the confusion learners might experience in the novel artefactual environment and thus facilitate the process of 'accommodating'. It can be argued, however, that to obtain these 'virtually incommunicable' skills learners must rely on their own practice. As a realist social theorist, Archer argues that the embeddedness of subjects in their practical activities does not transcend the subject/object distinction, as Giddens and Bourdieu maintain. For Giddens (1984), social structure only exists in the activities of human agents Similarly, Bourdieu's (1994) work highlights how many of our social practices and predispositions are embedded in habitus, social and cultural forms of capital. Archer argues however, the subject/object distinction originates from the fundamental human power of reflexivity. "Humans as practical actors are highly reflective about the objects of their skills and upon their contribution to good performance" (2000a:172). E-learners will thus not necessarily be bounded by the specific learning technologies provided by the course designers or tutors but may reflect on it and adapt it to fit their own purposes. The human power of learners is thus irreducible to the disposition or affordance of learning technologies.

Finally, the elaboration of discursive knowledge entails interplay between the components of the propositional culture (the Cultural System) and the discursive relations between cultural agents (Socio-Cultural integration). The former is culture without a knowing subject and the latter is culture with a knowing subject (Archer,1996:xvii). The Cultural System (CS) is seen as an emergent entity which "has an objective existence and autonomous logical relations amongst its component items (theories, beliefs, values, arguments, sense that these are independent of anyone's claim to know, to believe, to assert or to assent to them)" (Archer, 2000a:173). The CS is the product of historical Socio-Cultural interaction at a given time and thus the justification for

those propositions is restricted to the society at that time. In other words, the validity of any theory and propositions could always be tested in a novel practical context. "[T]he onus is upon the discursive order to prove itself by enhancing practice" (Archer, 2000a:178). A very close link can be seen here between Archer and earlier thinkers, such as Aristole, John Dewey and even Confucius, that discursive knowledge should be employed to improve practice and be tested in practice.

Therefore, according to Archer's ontological framework, it can be seen that most learning theorizing only addresses part of the totality of human relations with reality: natural relations in behaviourism; practical relations in the early cognitive perspective and social relations in socioculturalism. Thus, different approaches are advocated: learning through stimulus-response conditioning in the behaviourist approach; learning by discovery and active construction of ideas through exploration, experimentation, receiving feedback and adapting themselves accordingly in cognitive constructivist approach; learning with the support of dialogue and in the process of collaborative activity and through participation in communities of practice, progressing from novice to expert through observation, reflection, mentorship and legitimate peripheral participation in community activities, according to the socioculturalist approach. However, "we live, and must live, simultaneously in the natural, practical and social orders" (Archer, 2000a:9). Not surprisingly, the accounts of human learning given in these learning theories are somehow scattered and fragmented. There is evidence that e-learning practice and research value one (social constructivism) above the other (e.g. Jonassen. 1994; McConnell, 2000), and thus result in a tension over which to prioritise, such as giving more emphasis on communication over information, ideational involvement over practice in some circumstances. However, according to Archer (2000a), our relations with the world cannot be narrowly construed as 'society', let alone as 'language', 'discourse' and 'conversation'. Rather, self consciousness derives

from our embodied practices in the world, which is prior to, and primitive to, our sociality.

> …the emergence of our selfhood derives from how our species-being interacts with the way the world is, which is independent of how we take it to be, or the constructions we put upon it. Each one of us has to discover, through embodied practice, the distinctions between self and otherness, between subject and object, before finally arriving at the distinction between the self and other people. Only when these distinctions have been learned through embodied practice can they then expressed in language.
>
> (Archer, 2000a:7-8)

Thus, constructivism is criticised as impoverishing humanity by accrediting all of our human power – selfhood, reflexivity, thought, memory and emotionality – to society's discourse (Archer, 2000a:4). Archer argues that all knowledge entails an interplay of human beings as subject with reality as object. "[W]hat is central to human beings are not 'meanings', but 'doings'", given that "practice is pivotal to all forms of knowledge" (2000a:189). Thus, in an e-learning environment, not only are social conversations and communication desirable but also opportunities of embarking practice on for all sorts of different purposes: developing basic computer and internet skills, personal experiment and discovery, apprenticeship to accomplish in practical knowledge, etc.

It is argued that Archer's ontological framework brings the learners – as human beings - back to the real reality in which they find themselves and have to live, whether they have enrolled into any specific learning programme or not.

> Human beings can never put aside the fact that they have material interests as well as ideational involvements in the propositional culture of the day. Such material

interests are generally rooted in our embodiment, in what we need to survive, thrive or excel.

(Archer, 2000a:175)

In other words, in being a learner one does not cease to be a human being, living one's everyday life in a real word and tackling different relations between oneself and reality. To fully understand learners' experiences one has to take the 'wholeness' of human beings into account, without neglecting any aspect of it. This aligns with Dewey's and Confucius' ideas in learning discussed in the previous chapter that learning is an inseparable part of life and learning is a process of constructing and transforming life experiences.

3.2.2 Reflexivity and the emergence of personal identity and social identity

'Identity' is a complex concept in sociology, which deals with issues of what people see and understand of themselves within particular social settings, often in terms of identifying continuous trajectories in various aspects of people's lives (Gallacher et al, 2002). In relation to learning, some social learning theory has made attempts to connect learning with the development of learners' identity. Learner identity entails how individuals experience their learning, how they perceive the process of learning and how learning impacts on them (Wenger, 1998; Gerard and Rees, 2002; Lambe, 2006).

According to Archer (2000a), our personal identity and social identity develop from our relationship with reality through the human power of reflexivity. In order to examine the interplay of individuals with their natural and social realities, one has to understand how this development works. Archer (2000a) defines personal identity as how we uniquely define ourselves reflexively by virtue of our constellations of concerns about the world. The experiences encountered within the world arouse our concerns and it is the power of reflexivity that

enables us prioritise our concerns without neglecting others through the "internal conversation" (Archer, 2000a, 2003, 2007). It is thus an emotional-charged process. And personal identity is not fixed because it will undergo revision in the light of further experience: "it rarely sleeps and what it is doing throughout the endless contingent circumstances it encounters is continuously monitoring its concerns" (Archer, 2000a:295).

> In short, we are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we also define ourselves. We give a shape to our lives, which constitutes our internal personal integrity, and this pattern is recognisable by others as our concrete singularity.
>
> (Archer, 2000a:10)

The pursuit of any social practice entails the interplay between the causal powers of subjects themselves (agency) and those of relevant structural and cultural properties (structure). Social identity emerges from the interplay of these two. The detailed analytical approach (morphogenetic approach) and conceptual framework advocated by Archer will be considered in the following methodology chapter and data discussion chapters. The significant role of reflexivity in mediating the impact of structural properties and endorsement of different courses of action highlighted in Archer's work (1995, 2000a, 2003, 2007) will be discussed here.

Firstly, the causal power of structural and social properties has to be activated by agents through social action. This point is made by Archer by linking the *emergent existence* of structural properties with their *exercising causal power* through subjective social actions. Archer makes these two propositions in tackling the structure/agency problem from a position of analytical dualism: (a) structures are only held to emerge from the activities of people, and (b) structures only exert any effect when mediated through the activities of people.

Structures are ever relational emergent and never reified entities existing without social interaction (2000b:465). Therefore, an intentionally engaged project (course of action) is a premise to the exercise of any structural properties.

> Social properties or, more exactly, the exercise of their powers, are dependent upon the existence of what have been termed 'projects', where a project stands for any course of action intentionally engaged upon by a human being.
>
> (Archer, 2007:12)

Moreover, Archer (2007) argues that the unique feature of human beings' reflexivity is that the constraint or enablement of structural properties can be foreseen as anticipation or perception, which can serve as a deterrent or an encouragement. This is the case in an e-learning situation where learners' past experience of using (learning) technologies certainly has influences on their perceptions and expectations of learning on-line. As a result of their (fallible) reflexive judgements, some may overestimate an objective obstacle whilst others may downplay it. These effects can be manifested in taking part in the course delivered on-line in the first place, along with their attitude and commitment towards using technologies throughout their learning.

Secondly, in demonstrating the reflexive mediation of structural and cultural properties, Archer distinguishes between the *existence* of structural and cultural properties and the subjects' *responses* to them. Herein lies the important part played by reflexivity: people are able to "design and determine their responses to the structured circumstances in which they found themselves, in the light of what they personally care about most" (Archer, 2007:11). The deliberative process is emotionally charged rather than being a simple exercise in instrumental rationality. "Their effect is dependent upon our feeling bad if we fall

short of them and good if we live up to them" (Archer, 2000a:218). The variety in subjects' personal concerns and interests, degrees of commitment and costs that different agents will pay to see their projects through in the face of structural hindrances will certainly lead to diverse action outcomes. Therefore, it is not surprising that a complete uniformity of response would be rarely, if ever, found from every person who encounters the same constraint or the same enablement (Archer, 2000a:12). Similarly, diversity of impact can be found in the way cultural properties influence human actions. We cannot assume that every ideology can be successful in instilling in all people the belief in question, as inherent in the pitfall of 'cultural determinism' that has been warned against in this case.

> Ideologies, however hegemonic, are not in themselves influences, but rather attempts to influence. They too, as a cultural counterpart of structural factors, involve both impingement upon the subject and reception by the subject. Reception is obviously heterogeneous…

> (Archer, 2007:16)

The evidence of the variety in Chinese learners' learning behaviours examined in the review also suggests that what is detected in action patterns must remain nothing more than trends, where heterogeneity within a cultural group is a rule rather than an exception. In addition to that, this trend is working together with external contingencies of the social situation in which learners find themselves. Although Archer acknowledges that there are indeed some "unacknowledged conditions of action" where structural and cultural properties, such as vested interests and ideology influence people's motivation without their awareness. It is maintained that for such social factors to be influential, they do not first have to become internalised as part of a subject's dispositions (2007:18). Indeed, in this case, consistencies of action within Chinese learners do not demand a

biological or genetic interpretation whereby stereotypes can easily be formed. Instead, according to Archer (1995, 2000a, 2007) they exercise their influences by shaping the situation in which subjects find themselves.

In sum, it is to the merit of Archer's Critical Realist social theory that a more comprehensive understanding of learners and their relation to the context can be achieved, by placing learners in a broader natural and social world without ignoring their own subjectivity. It is a powerful perspective at both a theoretical and an analytical level, in which a coherent account has been given to help us understand and analyse the interplay between learner (agency) and context (structure) in e-learning. More importantly, reflexivity as a distinct human power makes learners 'active agents' who can exercise some governance in their own lives and learning, as opposed to 'passive agents' to whom things simply happen. The recognition of this subjectivity has significant implications in this research, in particular in two respects. (a) If the e-learner's personal power or voice does not count as something that would make a difference to their learning experience and is not paid sufficient attention to, their learning experience becomes very much technology-determined. The effectiveness of the learning would be determined solely by the intrinsic nature of the technology used; and this is certainly not the case. (b) Since subjective powers of reflexivity are indispensable to explaining social outcomes, it is necessary to examine learners' own reflexively defined reasons, aims and concerns. Chinese e-learners in this case are thus not treated as a homogenous group, thereby helping to avoid the pitfall of 'stereotyping'. By employing Archer's theoretical framework of 'structure and agency' in the e-learning contexts, as in this research, how these Chinese e-learners' personal power has been interacting with contextual properties at different levels is opened to effective investigation.

3.3 E-learners and their e-learning contexts

In this section, the interactions between individual agency and (social) reality will be explored, in particular from the perspective of e-learners' experiences of engaging with their e-learning environment. From a critical realistic sociological viewpoint, the pursuit of human projects in the social domain always encounters structural properties and activates them as powers. In this section, we examine the literature on the structural causal power emerging from e-learning settings which are exercised as constraints and enablements to students' learning. In addition, Archer (2007) has reminded us that that how personal power – reflexivity – has been found to mediate such influences must be taken into account. How do e-learners find their way around in the e-world, which often appears to be a new, perhaps almost alien learning environment? A vast amount can be learnt from learners' own accounts of their actual learning experiences. The following discussion addresses these issues. The literature is selected from those e-learning experiences documented mainly from learners' perspectives. It has to be noted that although different aspects of the contexts are distinguished for the purpose of discussion, they are not exercising their influences on learners' learning in isolation from each other.

3.3.1 The course contexts (course design and organisation)

- *E-pedagogy*

It is assumed in the e-learning research and practice community that technologies have potential to offer 'pedagogical innovations', although arguably these innovations are not reflected in actual changes to practice (Conole, 2007). Technologies can be used in different ways for different purposes, such as being a more efficient way to deliver the learning material, facilitating the interaction and communication. Thus, to be clear about the

assumptions made and to demonstrate on what pedagogical principles the added value of the 'e' is operating is primary to understand the pedagogical role of technology. For those holding the view that new technologies change the way of learning, several pedagogical approaches seem to have attracted their great attention; for instance, 'computer supported collaborative learning' advocated by the socio-constructivist approach, which has evidently become the dominant theoretical basis for learning technology design in recently years (Thorp, 2002; Jones & Mercer, 1993; McConnel, 2000). It focuses on the capacity of digital networks to support collaborative knowledge building and thus designing the learning environment to facilitate learners' collaboration, on-line communication and reflection is most widely discussed and documented.

Computer conferencing - a web-based communication system that supports asynchronous, textural interaction between two or more persons (Rourke & Anderson,2002:2) is promoted as an ideal medium to support substantive on-line discussion within this pedagogical approach. The claims made for the educational value of asynchronous discussion enabled by computer conferencing include the following: (a) Learners are exposed to a range of different perspectives on the material they are studying. The exchange of thoughts and ideas helps students to review and build their own understandings (Rowntree, 1995). (b) There are increased opportunities for students to reflect on their own opinions and those of others before contributing to an online discussion (McConnell, 2000; Mason, 1994). (c) Its anonymous nature has potential to encourage those who are less forthcoming in face-to-face discussions to participate online because there is ample time to compose messages and be sure of their communication in an on-line environment (Beasley & Smyth, 2004) (d) The presence of the teacher is not as dominating as in face-to-face situations; therefore, students can discuss in their own way, relating issues to their own experience and learn from each other's experiences

(Armstrong, et al. 2001).

However, despite these aspirational claims, the students' actual experiences of computer conferencing based on constructivist design are much more complicated. Sweeney et al. (2004) conducted individual interviews with 12 students who had participated in a blended course, where some seminars were conducted face-to-face and some on discussion boards. There were extreme variations in students' perceptions of public contributions; with some students view the discussion board as hard work, requiring reflection and time whereas other viewed it as offering deep learning and freedom of speech. However, the reasons for these variations remain unexplored explicitly in the study. There is no lack of positive experience reported elsewhere. For instance, No students in Peachey's (2004) study, who participated in an asynchronous discussion forum as part of a virtual learning environment (VLE) experienced any sense of isolation during the course. However, once again, the reasons for these positive findings were not explored in the study. The conclusions were drawn from analysis of the content of students' posting messages and from semi-structured interviews. The validity of the data from the end-of-course questionnaires completed by the students can also be questioned since the students had finished the course, may have been feeling relief and did not want to 'upset' the researchers, who are also the 'e-mediators' of the course. More often, however, a large gap is found between the designer's intention and learners' actual use.

Beasley and Smyth (2004) found that very limited use was made of the discussion facility for either peer or tutor interaction; students rarely participated in asynchronous discussion or collaboration simply because a facility for this had been provided (Salmon, 2002; Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). Student communication remained at the level of socialisation and information sharing, including exchanging Website addresses or reference sources; only a small

percentage of messages were based on higher-thinking orders, critical analysis of peer ideas (Hughes & Daykin, 2002; Rourke & Anderson, 2002).

Reasons for students' low usage of computer conferencing have been widely investigated and reported. An initial anxiety about online learning and computer conferencing is a very common experience for most first-time on-line learners. For them, a form of 'learning displacement' (Hughes & Daykin, 2002) - a lack of understanding about what they were required to do - was the main cause of their anxiety. Hughes and Lewis (2003) found that confusion over new online pedagogies was more significant than unfamiliarity with new technologies or lack of access; and this could be further compounded by very limited encouragement and guidance from lecturers. Thus, Monteith and Smith (2001) suggest that staff development needs to go beyond the practical, software-based workshops and revisit theories of encouraging contribution and discussion in the light of the new medium. Others reported feelings of anxiety over how to present themselves online (Brett, 2004; Ng, 2001) or how to contribute and exposure to criticism or criticizing each other's work (Macdonald, 2003). The fear of self-exposure to looking foolish (Jacobs and Cook, 2004) also arises from the permanence of CMC contributions (Light and Light, 1999; McConnell, 2000; O'Regan, 2003) since text is more durable than the spoken word, and is therefore subject to ongoing scrutiny. There were also some initial hesitations to adapt to the shift in power from tutor to student (Crook, 2002; Hammond et al. 2002).

In investigating students' e-learning experiences in general, Hara and Kling (1999) identify considerable frustration experienced by students with the technical aspects of learning online. O'Regan (2003) interviewed 11 students studying online about the emotions which influenced their experience and found frustration was the 'most pervasive emotion associated with studying online'.

There is wide variation in the elements of the course which might result in such feelings. Much of the frustration was associated with the technology, such as the unreliability of the internet connection; with trying to navigate; some was associated with the administrative processes, with instructions that were unclear and obscure; and other frustrations were with the design, structure and relevance of the web site content and with the learning processes, especially the rambling nature of online discussion. It seems that what caused the frustration for each individual is less important than the fact that it was experienced by every student at some stage and for some, caused them to question whether or not to continue.

To understand these psychological barriers to engaging with computer conferencing communication, the special nature of interaction in asynchronous, text-based environments has to be well understood in the first place. The interaction constructed is mainly mediated through text. Two implications can be drawn from this: firstly, this kind of interaction possesses very limited social presence and is unable to provide 'social context cues' (Bird, 2004). Garrison et al define *social presence* as "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as 'real' people into a community of learners" (2000:17). Much empirical evidence has proved the removal of the visual channel is likely produce a serious disturbance of the affective interaction (Rourke & Anderson, 2002). Grint found that students felt it difficult to carry out conversations in asynchronous time because "they were inhibited by their impression of a large lurking, anonymous audience, who would be reading their contributions" (1989:191). Secondly, in addition to this social need there is also an 'information' need. It is argued that co-present interaction is 'thick' with information, for example body language, gesture and silence. By contrast, the 'lean' messages often easily lead to some misunderstandings because the rich information provided in a face-to-face setting as the context for interpreting

comments and for getting to know the people and their style is missing (Goodyear, 2006). Besides this, co-presence attests to mutual commitment where the participants have taken the trouble to create a shared time-space. While the lack of immediate information concerning mutual attention and awareness might lead students to feel remote, detached and isolated, the lack of immediate feedback might lead to withdrawal from the discussions and it might be difficult to establish a sense of group cohesion. Thorpe and Godwin's (2006) study supports this argument in which they found that while there is no possibility of communication in real time, the voice or image of a person creates a 'presence' that can bring a more human and personal 'feel' to the learning. Finally, it is argued that co-presence could bring more efficient and flexible communication because 'loose talk' allows rapid topic identification and shifting between topics (Goodyear, 2006).

Besides these, asynchronous discussions can be very broad-ranging, because there can be parallel 'conversations' extending over time, which means that conferences can become disorganised and confusing (Ruberg, Moore & Taylor, 1996). McGrath (1990) notes that the more 'open' the system is made, regarding time, place, source and recipient, the more 'chaos' there can be in the flow of information. Given these reasons, it is not surprising that the use of threaded discussions expands the amount of time spent in discussion by students. Rather than making a one-off contribution over a short period, on-line learners need to think over the discussion on-and-off over a certain period, go to the discussion forum, take additional time to reflect on the material (Meyer, 2003), typing out every thought (Bird, 2004). Issues around time and time management have been raised by Allan (2004): for those learners who juggle online course work with several other competing duties and demands, the discussion group may not provide enough return for their time investment. In their study, Gunawardna & Salisbury (2001) found that some students managed

to succeed quite well without the discussion group by exploring other means of communication.

Cramphorn (2004) argues that the constructivist nature of the course design acts as a hindrance to the very weak student, but may assist the stronger candidate. However, this categorizing of 'weak' and 'strong' students is not very convincing, given the various reasons for the effectiveness – or lack of effectiveness - of students' use of computer conferencing shown in the account above. Hughes and Daykin (2002) argue that if it is accepted that students will generally be motivated to do well in study then they cannot be blamed for the shortfalls in the success of the module delivery. Rather, the design of the course and the teaching must be examined. In a quantitative study investigating the experience of engineering students undertaking a traditional course blended with some asynchronous discussions, Ellis and Calvo (2004) also found that the differences in experience described by individual students were related to their perceptions about learning as a whole and in particular their understanding of the role played by the different modes of discussion. In line with this, Moore and Aspen (2004) reveal students' positive experiences with e-learning were strongly linked to their understanding of why it is used and conversely negative experiences arose when students could not see the purpose of the online activities. These findings illuminate the need for more preparation in helping the students to understand the rationale behind the method used and the value of expending the effort required in an online learning environment (Hughes et al, 2002; Motteram and Forrester, 2005). In her five-stage model, Salmon (2002) maintains it is critical at the beginning that students should be strongly motivated by making very clear the value of CMC, its links to and integration with the rest of the course, its role in assessed components and the amount time they should allocate to its use. Apart from this 'why to use' issue, there is also a need to help the students to know 'how to use' computer conferencing

and learn from the experiences of others. It is argued that students must be taught the social skills required for high quality collaboration, which is particularly salient in novel communicative environments such as asynchronous, text-based computer conferencing, in which the communicative repertoire is limited to text (Rourke & Anderson, 2002).

Some evidence indicates that e-learning can promote collaborative learning, particularly when it incorporates an assessed task (Kear, 2004; McConnell 2000; Macdonald, 2003, 2004). However, pedagogies of collaboration actually place great strain on assessment strategies since there are no simple means of establishing criteria for group assessment (Beetham, 2008). Moreover, depending on the nature of the assessment of the discussion board, it can easily become an ineffective method for encouraging interaction (Howland & Moore, 2002). Furthermore, a key reason for students to participate in collaborative work and discussion has been identified as to obtain help, information and guidance from others, in order to support their own learning (Kear, 2004) and it was found that collaborative learning works better when students focus on solving practical problems rather than having a theoretical debate (Ronteltrap & Eurelings, 2002). In their study, Howland and Moore (2002) found students became disappointed when their peers posted "irrelevant, seemingly meaningless comments" for the purpose of receiving credit rather than for learning through discussion and debating a topic. Oliver (2001) also cautions against making these sorts of activities compulsory and assessing participation without consideration of the quality of participation. Some practitioners reflect on their practice by saying: "Collaborative work is very time consuming and is not always the most efficient way to learn from the amount of time consumed' (Mason, 2006:131).

In contrast to the constructivist model, the instructivist model, related to

behaviourist learning theory, is often cited in the e-learning literature as the other end of the continuum of approaches. Whilst 'communication', 'interaction', 'dialogue', 'collaboration' and 'active learners' are linked to constructivism, features such as 'content-driven', 'information exchange and transmission' and 'learner as passive recipient' are commonly associated with the instructivist learning model. However, caution has to be shown in advocating one whilst rejecting the other. The review in the previous chapter has revealed that there are differences in organising and structuring learning in different educational traditions. For instance, in the Chinese tradition, skill perfection and the acquisition of basics are seen as a necessary grounding for understanding and creativity. Behaviourism might have its place in learning processes in developing basic skills. Goodyear (2001) recognises that there may be occasions when the instructivist approach is appropriate. The main point here is to be as explicit as possible about the assumptions being made by the design team about learners and learning, before the course design process begins. A content-rich course design does not necessarily exclude communication and collaboration, and vice versa. After all, content is a form of communication: "the selection of particular ideas, the emphasis of features or concepts through a specific design – all of these can be interpreted semiotically, as an attempt to share meaning and understanding with others" (Oliver and Conole, 2007:222); or, at least, to help learners construct meaning from their experience of this thing. Theory as an important source of learning has been recognised in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions and educational practice, as discussed previously.

Moreover, the 'appropriation' of the technology may mean very different things in different situations and what is appropriate to one context will not necessarily be appropriate to another (Kilker, 2002). Indeed, as indicated in the previous review, a given form of learning activity could mean something completely

different in another cultural and educational system. It is thus difficult to produce effective, universally applicable guidelines on how to implement educational technology. Equally, no single learning model will fit into all different situations. It is, therefore, the technology that should be employed to fit into a particular context and purposes of use, and not vice versa (Anagnostopoulo 2002).

On the other hand, it appears that the take-up of networked technologies in higher education is largely pragmatic rather than being informed by any particular pedagogy (Jones and Steeples, 2002). Mayes and Freitas (2004) summarise eight key pragmatic issues for an e-learning implementation: efficiency versus effectiveness; costs, quality assurance; tutor/student ratio; staff development; student support; technical support and management support. For various reasons, some online courses are direct analogues of conventionally delivered courses, copying directly their structure, modes of assessment, timetable, etc. Little attention has been paid to what additional resources might be required for remote delivery (Darby, 2002). This is a common problem of e-learning in China as pointed in Chapter 1. Some assert that one of the fundamental problems of online learning is the existence of too few tutors and too many learners (Mayes, 2001). It can be argued that this problem is also particularly acute in the situation of Chinese higher education institutions. The commodification of educational provision has had a deep impact on how knowledge itself is perceived and 'sold' and how the acquisition of knowledge in this context is publicly acknowledged through assessment. For educationalists there are likely to be elements of both compliance, to ensure that their work continues to be valued, and resistance at some point for survival, where the demands and exigencies to 'make it work' become untenable (Edwards, 2004). Therefore, a university course might be taught not only under a single model. The material to be learned, the characteristics of students taking the course (Schell, 2001), the expectations of educational value and the

staff/student ratios all influence the decision making over the various models utilized.

- ***Course content, learning materials/resources***

Some research has pointed out that there is a pragmatic, problem solving orientation to learning for adult learners. Although this may not be exclusive to adult learners, they like their learning activities to be problem-centred (Brookfield ,1986). The connection to work, with current or future work in mind, is a salient feature of motivations for learning for adult learners. Thus, it implies that relevance to practice is critical to the course content design for adult e-learners.

Multimedia resources offer a more varied learning process. CD/DVD-ROM gives students access to resources beyond the course, enabling greater independence (Thorpe and Godwin, 2006). Lockitt (2004) summarizes that the learning materials need to be simple to use, relevant to individual needs, flexible and accessible. In their study examining students' actual use of an online learning environment, Beasley and Smyth (2004) found that there was a preference for paper-based material, used in a conjunction with elements of the online environment, because students appreciated the flexibility of working in any place that the paper materials allowed. The preference for working off-line with printed copies of material is also reported by others (e.g. Crook, 1997; Ward & Newlands, 1998; Atan et al. 2004; Brace-Govan & Clulow, 2000). It is argued that effective provision of learning materials and resources allows students to exploit their time in the physical and virtual environments to their best advantage (Moore and Aspden, 2004). Although reading was perceived as a passive activity, research found students were experiencing a very process which impacts in terms of enhanced meta-cognition and active processing of their own learning.

Moreover, Beasley and Smyth (2004) also found that despite the opportunity to explore the material in a more active, non-linear fashion, students exclusively studied the material linearly. They liked the materials structured into timed units because workplace-based students often had distinct blocks of free time to spend studying. As Moore and Aspden indicate, "continued access to learning materials through the VLE during independent study time appears to contribute to a continuing sense of connection to the institution, which is particularly relevant when students aren't physically on campus" (2004:4).

- Assessment

The academic life of students is dominated by the demands of assessment (Lockwood, 1995). It defines the curriculum of the course for many students and affects their decision making in their approach to learning and how much work they undertake. However, depending on the nature of the assessment, the conflict between 'getting the grade' and 'really learning something' can be seen as an unintended side-effect of the assessment system (Gibbs et al. 1984). The experience of learning is made less satisfactory by assessment methods that are perceived to be inappropriate. There are experiences reported from the practitioners that integrating the online work of the course with assessment is one of the best ways of establishing an environment that is purposeful, collaborative and effective (Mason, 2006).

Although it appears contrary to the nature of flexible, self-paced learning, it is reported that clearly stated learning objectives related to the assessment requirement are welcomed by students. "This is not spoon-feeding, rather, it is being clear and fair about what we expect of our students" (Morgan, 1993:104). In their study, Kirkwood and Price (2005) found that for most students studying does not have first call on their time and attention – their work and domestic

responsibilities have higher priority. Very often, the time available is insufficient for all of the course materials to be studied to the depth anticipated by the course designers. In these circumstances, assessment plays a significant part in guiding learners' choices, while a small proportion of learners seem to study only what is essential for assessment purposes. It is noticed that the explosion in resources available on the internet has driven more students make such choice (Sclater, et al, 2007).

Sclater et al (2007) argue that e-assessment is a critical part of any e-learning domain and when web-based courses do not use the technology to provide interactivity and automated feedback they fail to inspire students. They further analysed the advantage of e-assessment as being that it offers consistency of marking and acts as a tool for encouraging student engagement throughout a course or programme, for monitoring learning and identifying weaker students, and for reducing marking and administration. However, in a detailed survey undertaken by Warburton and Conole (2003), the main barriers to the uptake of CAA (Computer-assisted assessment) are seen as being the cost in both personal time and the expense of commercial software, the steep learning curve associated with the technology and constructing specialised e-assessment question types. Moreover, the perceived inability to address 'deep' learning and concerns about the authentication of students have also resulted in a bias against e-assessment (Sclater, et al, 2007).

3.3.2 The teaching context

It is widely recognised that the support and guidance of the tutor is a crucial component in students' satisfaction with their learning experience. The important influence of the tutor is hardly different in face-to-face teaching and e-learning courses. In e-learning courses, not only the ways in which course material delivered has been changed but the ways in which courses are being

taught. Among these changes, the teacher's role and responsibility have attracted much discussion.

- ***The role of teacher***

In his book on adult education, Jarvis (2004) defines the variety in teachers' role as didactic, Socratic, facilitative or experiential. The presence and involvement of teachers in e-learning courses have implications for the role they perform in the teaching and learning process. Much emphasis has been given to the teacher performing as a facilitator, an e-moderator, rather than acting in a didactic role in an asynchronous learning network (e.g. Salmon, 2002; Sweeney et al. 2004). As a facilitator, the teacher is no longer in full control and learners are expected actively to take responsibility for their own learning by performing a substantial part of the teaching presence role themselves (Anderson, et. al, 2001; Jones et al. 2000).

The positions held regarding the presence and the extent of the teacher's involvement in the discussion vary in the literature. Some believe that the dominating presence of the teacher in face-to-face interaction could inhibit the free exchange of ideas (Armstrong et al.2001; Kremer & McGuinness, 1998). However, in a study set up to explore the effect of teacher presence or absence, Light et al (2000) found that students welcomed greater tutor engagement, to prevent the discussion going widely off at a tangent. Similarly, other research also reported that many students require the academic authority of the tutor and want guidance rather than absolute independence in learning (Bannister & Parr, 2001). Students look for the teacher to provide a positive input or attitude (Kear, 2004) and having a teacher's active presence in the online discussions seems to be a critical issue (McAlpine et al, 2004; Rimmershaw, 1999). It was found that students responded better when the teacher actively participated in the discussion and valued the contributed ideas and experiences seriously

(Rimmershaw, 1999). After all, it is a teacher's duty to guide the intellectual development of their students, to lead them gently towards new understandings that they would find difficult on their own (Armstrong et al. 2001). In general, teachers' interventions are needed (Clouder & Deepwell, 2004), their involvement and active participation being valued by students, whether in an e-learning settings or face-to-face learning environment.

In '*Rethinking University Teaching*', Laurillard (2002) argues for an approach to teaching that is firmly based on the interactions between students, teacher and subject matter. She argues that there must be a continuing dialogue between teacher and student which deals explicitly with the conceptions of both, although what seems to be missing from her account is interaction among students. Whether we take a predominantly instructivist or constructivist approach, the teacher's responsibility is to continue the dialogue in a way that deepens the learner's understanding. Partly this will be a process of commenting on the students' performance in learning tasks (Mayes, 2001). Morgan (1993) argues that dialogue between students and teachers is a most effective medium for students to find out what is required of them in their studies. However, in distance education, this seems a slow and more difficult process. The situation of it being difficult to "tell" students in a text-based medium gets worse where there is a lack of a campus peer group in distance education. Indeed, students might understand the tasks facing them in rather different ways from that of the lecturer and these differences directly affect how students approach their study. It would not be surprising if they end up doing something which the lecturer could not have predicted.

Coomey and Stephenson (2001) reviewed one hundred research reports and journal articles on e-learning practice and they found in all cases students say that effective procedures for instructor/tutor/peer feedback are the most

important features of a successful online course. Furthermore, the opportunity to discuss work with a tutor is crucial for the development of confidence in how to tackle the work. Howland and Moore found some students felt a lack of confidence in their ability to interpret assignment requirements and were conscious of lacking the guidance of verbal feedback from an instructor. As noted by one participant, "You have to read between the lines a lot of times to understand what is expected because there is no verbal feedback to go by" (Howland and Moore, 2002:189). It is also evident with Open University students that even after they have completed a number of courses, there can still be uncertainty about what the demands of study are (Morgan, 1993). Therefore, it can be seen from the literature that while there is enthusiastic elaboration in transforming the teacher into a more facilitative role in e-learning environments, it must not simply be put into practice as a decrease in the level of the pedagogical guidance and support given to the students. An on-line learning environment actually presents an additional challenge in delivering adequate support to learners.

On the other hand, Thomas et al (2004) argue that initial students' perceptions of what to expect from e-moderators are probably biased by previous educational experiences of traditional teaching. Some students expect immediate feedback in online courses because they have the perception that the instructor is readily available regardless of the day and the time. Within an online course, instructors may be perceived as inaccessible when they do not respond in a timely fashion and as desired by the student. This perception can lead students to feel 'isolated' and more anxious over the course (Howland and Moore 2002). As pointed out in Chapter 2, teachers bear a moral responsibility to students in Chinese educational tradition and there are intensive informal interactions between students and teachers outside the classroom. In universities, some teachers and students are co-resident on campus. These

cultural tradition and experiences might also shape Chinese adult e-learners' expectations towards the teachers' role in an e-learning programme.

- The relationship between teacher & student

It is believed that the changing role of the teacher has implications in the changing relationship with students in an e-learning environment. In the classroom a teacher can usually control events to ensure that his/her status remains secure. But open learning schemes tend to erode this capability for control by the teacher. The 'co-participation' in the online discussions is assumed to put teachers in a more 'equal' position with their students. Teaching becomes more exposed and 'open' and therefore the conventional balance of power, authority and control might be challenged. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) argue that at the heart of the discussion is the open and unpredictable creation of meanings through collaborative inquiry. The course of discussion cannot be planned in detail and teachers who feel they ought to know find themselves in a situation where they do not; if that situation is public, the negative effect upon a teacher's self-concept may be serious. For some, this change may be seen as opportunity for self-evaluation and reflection whilst others might fear student criticism and management disappointment. However, McConnell (1999) observes no sign of the teacher resorting to a differential power relationship in order to retain her status.

The literature reveals that the tension between the traditional role of teacher and the new social settings in online environments does exist. Some argue that the use of e-learning does not automatically lead to a change in anyone's role, if that is not part of the underlying educational philosophy of the course designer (Jones, 2000, Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). The teacher is seen by some authors as an authority figure in the classroom settings in CHC learning environments, where challenging the teacher in public is seen as inappropriate behaviour.

However, it is argued that this might be a result of situational constraint and socialisation rather than cultural predisposition. Thus, it is interesting to explore that in an e-learning environment if the formal and hierarchical relationship between teacher and student would undergo some significant change if the philosophy of collaborative learning is adopted in the learning design.

Affective support from the teacher was perceived to be a critical motivating factor for learners when they were working in their new learning environment (Maor, 2003). Goleman (1998) sees affective support as working with emotional intelligence. Jarvis (2004) argues that emotions are one of our most powerful components and yet they have been a neglected factor in teaching. Indeed, teaching and learning is a dialogue between persons in which the teacher is concerned for the learner. The person is, therefore, more important than correct knowledge and the manner through which teachers interact with learners. Teaching style is probably more important than the actual teaching methods employed. Therefore, the lecturer's interest in the students and helpfulness with study difficulties are the most important qualities influencing students' attitudes and approaches. It is argued here that the affective support from the teacher could have significant influences on learners in a Chinese e-learning environment, given that Chinese teachers in conventional classroom contexts were found to bear a moral responsibility of caring for their students and an implicit influence exists behind the façade of the transmission of knowledge (Ho, 2001; Gao & Watkins, 2001). Thus, it can be a challenging task for teachers to ensure this sense of care and responsibility while changing the method of the course delivery.

Moreover, tutors' actions are not measured by their students in isolation from other contextual considerations. The atmosphere and milieu in various departments convey a set of institutional signals about what sort of learning and

studying are going to be required, and also rewarded (Morgan, 1993). For instance, the induction of new students to a course forms an integral part of shaping the academic environment which can provide new students with the first cues of what is going to be required of them. The human dimension in the induction can serve to create a 'feeling of belonging' to a university, with a sense of 'connectedness', in contrast to the experience of being a distance education student as a feeling of isolation and alienation (Morgan, 1993). This can be seen as immensely important for enhancing students' experiences in open and distance learning.

3.3.3 The personal context

- *Perceptions and use of technologies*

The technologies learners use in their e-learning courses are often chosen by course designers and institutions in which the courses are delivered. Consequently, research has also frequently fallen into testing the effectiveness or impacts of a specific technology or intervention from the perspectives of institutions. Very few in-depth studies have given detailed accounts of the learners' perception of technologies and how they are using technologies in their formal studies (Sharp et al, 2005). Learners' own accounts of their learning experiences, however, form the central focus of this study. The lack of understanding of learners' needs and preferences in using technologies could inhibit any e-learning programmes from being effective in facilitating students' learning. In responding to this, some initiatives have been taken in the U.K. to explore learners' actual use and experience of technology across the programmes and subject disciplines (e.g. Creanor *et al.* 2006; Conole *et al.* 2006). Some trends can be identified from these investigations:

- Learners are immersed in a rich, technology-enhanced learning

environment and they are using technologies to support their different learning activities: searching and retrieving information, communication, preparing course work etc.

- Learners are living complex and time-constrained lives. In these circumstances efficient and flexible access to learning materials, experts and communities is increasingly important.

- Effective e-learners have strong personal views on different types of learning activities and how technologies may or may not support them. They are appropriating technologies to meet their own personal, individual needs mixing use of general ICT tools and resources with official course or institutional tools and resources.

- There is an 'underworld' of informal learning and social networking which is not mandated or supported by the institution but is frequently enabled and sustained by the use of technology. Boundaries between using technology for learning and for leisure purposes are becoming increasingly blurred.

These trends have many common features with those described in Oblinger and Oblinger's (2005) book on the 'net generation learners' – students who were born in the 1980s and have grown up with technology as opposed to 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001) who did not. It is argued that these students are comfortable with technologies; they prefer to receive information quickly; they use technology for various but clear purposes: access to rich information, do things faster, help understand concepts, keep connected and communication with others; they prefer learning by doing, participating and engaging rather than being told. Similarly, Frand (2000) observed that today's young students take technology for granted and staying connected is a central part of their lives. He argued that for these young students, what one can do in the workplace is more important than knowing the facts and rules, and learning is accomplished through trial and error as opposed to a logical and rule-based

approach. However, when the difference is attributed to one generation versus to another, there is a danger of treating these differences as generic predispositions and unchangeable. There is no solid evidence yet to prove the validity of such claims. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) suggest that the difference may due to the extent of exposure to technology and experiences gained rather than being a property of the generation itself.

These research findings shed some light on learners' strong preference on using technologies, which can be summarised as two major themes: relevance and appropriation; control and choice. Firstly, learners use technology for some practical purpose, and not for the sake of using technology. As a student comment captured in Kvavik (2005) states: "Information technology is just a tool. Like all tools, if used properly it can be an asset. If used improperly, it can become an obstacle to achieving its intended purpose. Never is it a panacea". Although some evidence shows higher levels of enthusiasm, students are consistently looking for practical applications of technology in a real-world context. From learners' points of view, the benefits of technology include convenience in saving time, access to and distribution of information, improving learning, interaction, communication. In Conole, et al's (2006) study, students were found to use the web extensively to extend their understanding of concepts and supplement course material; the internet is increasingly becoming the primary resource for reference. By contrast, printed textbooks were considered by some to be outdated and difficult to digest but were still used by many as key resources. Although the degree to which tutors steered students in terms of relevant resources varied across different institutions, peer reviewing was much in evidence in activities such as sharing the relevant links to course-related materials. Technologies are also appropriated by learners for their strengths in terms of visual and auditory capabilities.

Thus, learners' own accounts have told us that it is not technology that is important but the activity it enables. In other words, it is not what specific technology we use that matters but what we can do with that technology. This is closely linked to the second theme identified in recent research: control and choice. The affordance of technology enables learners to do things in their own way to meet their own needs. Kvavik (2005) found a key component of the Net Generation's definition of technology is customization, or the ability to adapt technology to meet individual needs, rather than vice versa. This assertion matches the finding of Conole et al (2006) that learners make extensive use of personally-owned technologies. To exert control, learners need the ownership of technology. From this perspective, it might not be surprising to see that the communication technologies most used by learners are often outside institutional control (e.g. mobile phone, skype, MSN Messenger). Learners expressed positive feelings about such communication technologies for their immediacy, flexibility and low cost. For those learners who had grown up with technologies with 'Zero Tolerance for Delay' (Frand, 2000) the immediacy of a response and the speed at which they receive information was more expected. Technologies available today have just enabled the increased speed of responding and interaction, which maybe satisfying human nature in its desire for immediate gratification (Frand, 2000), By contrast, as revealed from the earlier review, students are more ambivalent about the value of discussion forums and time lag was seen as one of the major problems. Similarly, institutional virtual learning environments (VLEs) were also reported on less favourably too. The first theme found in the learners' experience applies here: only when VLE meets specific, individual needs will learners adopt them. For instance, Conole et al (2006) found the access to an integrated set of online course-related information and resources was really appreciated by students who worked part-time, had children, lived some distance from campus or had a heavy workload.

Importantly, it is perceived by learners, including the 'Net Generation' learners that computers can never replace human beings and social interaction is deemed important in their learning experience. "Feedback from the professor is vital, and working in groups is the norm" (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005:4.5). When the internet has become an everyday vehicle for interaction and there are increased means of communication in an online society, the human desire for connection and face-to-face contact is not diminished. This assertion is supported by Thorp and Godwin's (2006) finding that interpersonal interaction can enhance feelings of connection, particularly with those at the same learning stage. Moreover, they argue that this helps position the online environment as a positive and even a friendly 'place', where learning can happen safely. In their study, learners reported that face-to-face contact with tutors was vital in building a sense of community or 'belonging' to the class or study group, which could not be replaced by a machine (Conole et al, 2006). These findings highlight the significance of social presence and relationships in the online learning environment: relationship is a driving force in the learning process.

- *Access and skills*

Insufficient time and limited computer/internet access were often reported as very common barriers to learning on-line (e.g. Atack & Rankin, 2001). Kirkwood and Price (2005) used a large-scale survey to investigate students' use of media, access to media technologies and ICT access and use. They found there are practical difficulties associated with personal computing. Access to ICT is rarely ideal and unrestricted: learners often have to share computing and communication facilities with others and this affects the availability and quality of the usage. When working at home the computer location might not be calm and undisturbed, whilst computer access in the workplace is often restricted and/or requires the sharing of resources with other users. Often the loading of

'external' software – including course resources – onto an employer's computer is prohibited. Also, getting access to and downloading remote resources can be very time-consuming when working via a dial-up network. Hence, it is suggested that course designers should not be over-dependent upon ICT and should provide ample opportunities for learners to work off-line with materials.

Necessary information literacy or fluency and technical skills are essential to navigate the new learning environment (Kvavik, 2005; Moore & Aspden, 2004). Yet, general technical proficiency is not synonymous with an ability to learn online (Baptista-Nunes & McPherson, 2002). Research found students have very basic office suite skills as well as e-mail and basic Web surfing skills while lacking high levels of competence across a wide range of applications (Kvavik, 2005; Kirkwood and Price, 2005). Those with ICT experience from other contexts are likely to exhibit fluency in ICT use in their studies whilst those without such experience will be dependent upon course designers to demonstrate the potential and guide their use of ICT. This calls attention to the need for institutions to teach students computer skills beyond the fundamentals.

- ***Learning strategies***

A. Time management

Time is identified as a primary concern for students engaged in e-learning and they need to adapt and reconstruct their approaches to time management (Allan, 2004; Cramphon, 2004; Meyer, 2003; Sweeney et al. 2004). Mason (2006) maintains that being time-poor is probably the modern disease, so perhaps students are simply reflecting common experience.

Allan (2004) explored how students reconstruct their approaches to time management at an early stage in their programme and go on to develop a range of different time management strategies. Using data from a discussion

forum, where 45 students were asked to reflect on their experiences of undertaking online professional development courses at Nottingham Trent University, Cramphorn (2004) explored what time might be needed for. He identified physical writing time, time lag, time needed to reflect on posts and finding time in busy schedules included. Meyer (2003) explores the impact of time on classroom-based and online discussions and makes explicit the important connection between time and thinking, and the need for time and, in many situations the passage of time, to improve critical or high level thinking. These findings also illustrate the higher level of difficulties students might have in managing their time while studying in a course based on a constructivist learning model. Sweeney et al. report that students became aware that the online seminars required them to "get organised and to think extensively about the discussion on-and-off over a week, rather than making a one-off contribution over a short period of time in a face-to-face session" (2004:320). This concern is reinforced by the findings from Howland & Moore (2002) that students found it difficult scheduling time for an Internet-based course while continuing to work and fulfil family obligations. It is noticeable therefore, although the idea of tightly timed units of online instruction is counter to the idea of self-paced learning in constructivist design, it is found to have been beneficial to the workplace-based students, who often had distinct blocks of free time to spend studying (Beasley & Smyth, 2004).

There are many tensions which most adult students have to resolve as they try to complete their studies and earn a living at the same time (McCartan, 2000). Balancing work and study can be relatively easy if employers have policies for supporting study and put them into practice. However, for many students study is something which occurs outside of work as a private activity, and work has to be given its necessary priority. For instance, Jones et al (2004) found that the increased pressure of work became the most frequently identified cause of

withdrawal by the respondents in their study. There is also the other balance between family and leisure activities which needs to be taken into account. Kember (1995) found that successful learners become socially integrated by negotiating support for their study time and resources from their employer, colleagues, family, and friends, and they take direct control and responsibility for their distance studies.

B. Self-directed/self-management skills

Researchers and practitioners have noted self-direction and self-management as skills that are critical for individuals engaged in online learning (Moore and Aspden, 2004; Atman, 1988). Ideally, autonomous learners are those who take charge of their own learning in the service of their needs and purposes, to act independently and in co-operation with others as social responsible people (Dam, 1995:1). In their study, self-management, self-monitoring, and self-reliance were indicated as important attributes for a successful learning experience (Howland & Moore, 2002). These strategies appear to be even more essential for success in an online course than in the face-to-face classroom since some students reported they had difficulty staying on schedule without the structure of face-to-face meetings. It is argued by Howland and Moore (2002) that students who rely heavily on the instructor to guide their learning may benefit from learning how to become more self-directed learners in an online course.

In sum, this review has identified some prominent constraints and enablements to e-learning from different aspects of the learning settings viewed from learners' perspectives. The constraints and enablements from the course design and organisation, teaching and assessment and learners' personal contexts work together in shaping the situation in which learning occurs and, thus, learners' experiences. Moreover, the review has proved the importance of

understanding the e-learning phenomenon from learners' perspectives, so as to shed light on understanding the gap between students' actual experience and the expectations and intentions of course designers. It is evidenced that e-learning is a new experience for many e-learners, which is discontinuous with their former learning experience. The conflict can be compounded where there are striking differences in pedagogical design, teaching and assessment methods. These conflicts can also lead to a negative experience or even withdrawal from the course or, on the contrary, greater opportunity for learning. The attributes of these variations, however, are context-dependent rather than learner-dependent. Two main shortfalls in the research that has been reviewed may be identified: (1) most research has been conducted in a Western context with the participants from the same social and cultural backgrounds, and the social and cultural influences on e-learning experiences thus are examined to only a very limited extent; (2) as a consequence of the first shortfall, there is a shortage of research to understand learners' e-learning experiences by making the link between the influences from micro-structural properties in e-learning settings with those from the macro-structural level of wider social and cultural contexts. Much e-learning research reviewed here has focused on self-contained e-learning environments. More attention has been paid to the individualised learning process with insufficient recognition being provided to the social context in which e-learning take place. There is a need, therefore, to investigate e-learning phenomena from the perspective of social theories of learning.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology and Methods

Research methodology and methods are far beyond simply being technical exercises, but reflect a set of assumptions we make of the world and the natural or social phenomena we are trying to understand. In social science, these assumptions include (a) an ontological kind – the nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated; (b) an epistemological kind – the very basis of knowledge, its nature and forms, how it can be acquired and communicated to others; (c) human nature and the relationship between human beings and their environment (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). These assumptions have direct influences on methodological considerations and thus on data collection methods.

Chinese adult e-learners' learning experience is the social phenomenon this study is looking at. What is the nature of learners' experiences and how should they be studied and interpreted? How can we understand the relationship between learners and their environment and so how their learning experiences reflect such a relationship? What approaches and data collection methods are appropriate to be employed to reach such understanding and why? These issues will be tackled in this chapter.

4.1 The nature of learners' experience

4.1.1 Experience in two competing traditional philosophical camps

"In any field of study, the nature of what exists cannot be unrelated to how it is studied" (Archer,1995:16). Methodology as an explanatory programme requires identification of what is to be explained. Different ontologies, therefore, furnish

different 'regulative principles' about the methodology appropriate to do the explaining (Archer, 1995). What the learners' experience is held to be necessarily becomes the starting point of my methodology considerations.

In the history of the philosophy of human science, the very nature or essence of social phenomena and reality has evoked long-lasting debates between different philosophical camps. Among these, the leading positions are naturalistic positivism and anti-naturalistic hermeneutics (Bhaskar, 1998). The focus has been to examine whether society and human phenomena generally could be studied in the same way as nature. In the hyper-naturalistic positivistic view, social reality is external to individuals and all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can only be advanced by means of observation and experiment. Such knowledge is 'hard', objective and capable of being transmitted in tangible form; human beings and their experiences are regarded as products of the environment and can only be studied through their (observable) learning behaviours (Cohen et al, 2000). This form of positivism may find its expression in Behaviourism and suffer from similar problems if it undermines life and mind. Were such a perspective to be adopted in this study, learners would be seen as having no capacity to create, interpret and present their learning experiences to themselves and investigators. Therefore, there would be no interest in learners' inner world – their intentions, emotions, reasons, feelings, etc. This would, therefore, easily lead to the pitfall of cultural-determinism or technology-determinism in studying learner experiences of e-learning, where learners' voices are ignored or marginalised.

It is widely agreed that the social world is much more complex than the natural world. Archer (1998) defines these differences as:

It is quintessential that society is an open system…there are properties and powers

particular to people which include a reflexivity towards and creativity about any social context which they confront…there is, in short, no such thing as an enclosed order in society because it is not just the investigators but the inhabitants who can engage in thought experiments and put them into practice.

(Archer, 1998:190)

Therefore, based on a distinctive conception of the uniqueness of the social realm, in an anti-naturalistic hermeneutic view, social reality is the product of individual consciousness and is pre-interpreted, conceptualised or linguistic in character; which means it can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated. In order to understand the subjective world of human experience, anti-positivists suggest researchers share their frame of reference with the subjects and understand individuals' interpretations of the world around them from inside, not the outside, as a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts (Cohen et al, 2000). In such an approach, people are deliberate and creative in their action. They construct their own experiences; interpret events, contexts and situations. Therefore there is a need to examine situations through the eyes of participants rather than the researcher (Cohen et al, 2000). This approach finds its expression in phenomenological, ethnomethodological and interpretive studies, although Bhaskar (1998) argues that discriminations have to be made in this camp between those who try to synthesize or combine positive and hermeneutical principles, such as Weber and Habermas, with those who completely deny any purchase of positivism in the human science, such as Gadamer and Winch. Therefore, the divide between these two leading philosophical camps becomes that of subjectivity and objectivity: one told from an 'insider' perspective of 'understanding', and the other form the 'outsider' perspective of 'explanation' (Hollis and Smith, 1994).

Given the diversity of feeder disciplines from which learning technology has emerged (education, psychology, computer science, etc), there is a wide spectrum of research approaches being used to conduct research in this field (Conole et al. 2004). However, Hodgson et al (2001) note that there has been a general vagueness over methodology in much published research and a tendency towards objective perspectives on e-learning. Such work largely relies on naïve measures of effectiveness, which are implicitly positivistic in nature - even though this may not be explicitly declared - such as exam score difference or Likert-scale expressions of satisfaction. This is evident in many e-learning evaluation initiatives. The relationship between the theoretical position of the researchers and their interpretation of data remains largely unexplored within the context of e-learning research and evaluation (Oliver & Harvey, 2002). In their review of methodological issues in learning technology, Conole et al (2004) conclude that learning technology research is a practical and applied discipline which is contextualised in nature. As a result of an emphasis on the learning context of learning technology, there is evidence of a significant shift towards the Constructivist -Interpretive-Qualitative paradigm in research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002), which places more importance on context in developing interpretations of events being studied. This begins with the assumption that realities are not objectively "out there" but are constructed by people.

One of the fundamental tasks of this research is to understand Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences, mainly from their own perspectives. This means it is essential to interpret subjective meanings without imposing existing forms and categories. At first glance, the paradigm in the second camp seems more appropriate to reaching an understanding of the meaning assigned by learners to their e-learning experience. This approach is therefore attractive because it enables me to gain insight into the understanding of learners' experience of e-learning through their own accounts in response to questions such as: what did learners enjoy most or least? What helped or constrained their learning? How did they manage to fit learning into their whole life

experiences? What are their feelings and attitude towards technologies and how technologies have been used? However, the aim of the study is to go beyond a description of learners' e-learning experiences, no matter how 'thick' it may be. Rather, it is essential to explain the possible macro- (socio-cultural) and micro- (e-learning settings) influences on learners' e-learning experiences. Therefore, the study must find a way to combine the 'insider' perspective of 'understanding', and the 'outsider' perspective of 'explanation' (Hollis and Smith, 1994). Moreover, questions arising from the hermeneutic position remain: to what extent is learners' experience a product of the human interpretations? And to what extent is it structured by 'deeper causes which are opaque to human consciousnesses'? (Durkheim, in Labriola, 1985:28). Is it possible that these actors are partially conscious and their reports may be incomplete and misleading?   And even if we reach an understanding of learning phenomena from the learners' perspective, can the causes we find be used as reasons for explanation?

4.1.2 A Critical Realist Social Theory Perspective

The nature of experience can be understood only by noting that it includes an active and a passive element peculiarly combined. On the active hand, experience is *trying* – a meaning which is made explicit in the connected term experiment. On the passive, it is *undergoing*. When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences.

(Dewey, 1916:139)

John Dewey's philosophy of experience indicates that experience is an interaction between an organism and its environment. It is not a rigid and closed thing but vital and hence growing (Dewey, 1933). As noted in Chapter 2, this idea is in line with the nature of learning in Confucius' philosophy of education

that the learner is an active organism with various potentialities capable of being developed as well as retarded by the environment. Such a view is adopted in this thesis; thus learners' experiences of e-learning examined in this study are sets of skills, aptitudes and judgements gained through their involvement in two e-learning programmes. When taking the 'wholeness' of human beings into account, as discussed previously, such involvement would comprise practice and activities of all kinds: personal discovery and observation, contemplation as well as social conversation and discussion. Practice as pivotal to all forms of knowledge (Archer, 2000a), in this case, generates learners' experiences in different forms. According to Archer (2000a) as outlined earlier, our experiences encountered within the world arouse our concerns: concerns about our physical well-being when confronting the natural world; performative concerns as an unavoidable part of our inevitable practical engagement with the world of material culture, and self-worth in participating in the social realm. Therefore, for an explanatory programme to be robust, it is essential for it to capture the accounts of these different concerns, such as in Archer's ontological framework (Figure 3.1) and the emergence of personal identity - deriving from our engagement with the world: how we uniquely define ourselves reflexively by virtue of our constellations of concerns about the world. Such an explanatory programme is thus illuminating in understanding and explaining learners' experiences and their relationship to the contexts.

Secondly, realist social theory starts with a basic ontological premise about social reality: the existence of intransitive entities, which is independent of their identification, is a condition for the possibility of social science. As Bhaskar (1998:17) put it:

…the intransitive objects of knowledge are in general invariant to our knowledge of them: they are the real things and structures, mechanisms and processes, events

and possibilities of the world; and for the most part they are quite independent of us. They are not unknowable, because as a matter of fact quite a bit is known about them…But neither are they in any way dependent upon our knowledge, let alone perception, of them. They are the intransitive, science-independent, objects of scientific discovery and investigation.

In other words, any explanation of social matters requires "the generic assertion that there is a state of the matter which is what it is, regardless of how we do view it, choose to view it or are somehow manipulated into viewing it" (Archer, 1998:195). The claim for the existence of 'intransitive objects' in the social world would be rejected by those who advocate a discursive ontology, such as Harré (1983:65): "I take the array of persons as a primary human reality. I take the conversations in which those persons are engaged as completing the primary structure, bringing into being social and psychological reality. Conversation is to be thought of as creating a social world just as causality generates a physical one". Consequently, "in the social sciences facts, at the level at which we experience them, are wholly the creation of theorising, of interpreting them". The Constructivist-Interpretive-Qualitative paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002) would occupy the same ontological ground as Harré. However, is there any factor from reality which influences us without our conceptualization of it on our part? Archer (1998) consistently defends the existence of this category by giving examples, such as inflation, the effects of which on spending-power, are causally influential whether we have any concept of economics or not. It is certainly difficult to maintain that there is no inflation unless it has been mediated by human awareness or conception.

Finally, realism insists that none of the properties and powers of subjects are understandable in isolation from reality. All knowledge entails an interplay of human beings as subject with reality as object, with experience as no exception.

Thus,

> experience is necessarily an experience of something, for the verb cannot be intransitive. Thus the experiencer is someone who encounters something prior to it, relatively autonomous from it and causally efficacious upon it.
>
> (Archer, 2000a:154)

Therefore, experience is a relational term, which entails two sets of powers: those of human beings and those of the reality. In this case, they will be the power of learners themselves and their learning environment as well as socio-cultural contexts in which the learners are situated. Any account given without reference to both sides of the powers would be unsustainable .

Therefore, adopting a realist ontological perspective, my own metaphysical assumption of learners' experience is that there is a state of learners' e-learning experiences which is what it is as a result of learners' (unavoidable) involvement in one of two e-learning programmes in different ways and forms. The existence of such experience does not depend on an ontology that is one of (observable) events, as positivism might have maintained. On the other hand, in contrast to the hermeneutical perspective, such experience also does not equate with whatever we take it to be. It is possible that learners' accounts of their experiences are both corrigible and limited by the existence of unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and unconscious motivations, because of the pre-existence of structural properties. Moreover, such existence, such as the power relationships, might not come from 'society's conversation' or the meaning we choose to give to it. Any collapse of the ontological into the epistemological is known as the 'epistemic fallacy' (Archer, 1998:195) - confusing what is with what we take it to be. To avoid this, Archer suggests:

> I prefer double doors, permitting structural access which is possible through detecting the causal efficacy of properties which do not depend upon consciousness of them. By maintaining this distinction between structure and agency (and the decoupage between ontology and epistemology), this enables one additionally to explain the hermeneutic struggle to make sense of our environment, and to make nonsense of it because usually not all is revealed to consciousness and sometimes that is because it is shaped outside our conscious awareness.
>
> (Archer, 1998:199)

On the other hand, it is correct for the hermeneutical tradition to point out that social science deals with a pre-interpreted reality "in which the meanings developed by active subjects enter the actual constitution or production of the world" (Giddens, 1976). In contrast to the positivist view, actors' accounts form the indispensable starting point of social inquiry and an account of social activity which excluded the agents' own description of it would be radically misleading.

In sum, learners' e-learning experiences cannot, therefore, be construed independently from the way reality is (the socio-cultural context, the institutional policy, the course design, the infrastructures, teaching and assessment, etc) and which pre-exists and conditions their experiences. Any account given of learners' experiences without referring to this reality is incomprehensible because learners gain their learning experiences through engaging with the e-learning programmes embedded in the socio-cultural context in which they are. Consequently, learners are not completely free to construe their learning experiences as they wish: learners' e-learning experiences are not reducible to their own accounts. And yet, it is equally important to recognize that "people… are capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies, in ways which are unpredictable because of their

creative powers as human beings" (Archer, 1995:195). In responding or reacting to social reality, learners make reflexive decisions in creating their learning experiences. Learners' e-learning experiences, therefore, reflect the interplay between two sets of power: the structural power from the social reality and human power from the learners themselves. Such interplay is inspired by the complex relationship between human beings and their context as captured by Archer (1995:2) thus:

> We are simultaneously free and constrained and we also have some awareness of it. The former derives from the nature of social reality; the latter from human nature's reflexivity. Together they generate an authentic (if imperfect) reflection upon the human condition in society.

This is in line with Dewey's philosophy of experience, presented in the first place in this section, that experience involves a connection of doing and undergoing thus is "an interplay of those two sets of conditions [external conditions and internal factors]" (Dewey, 1938:28).

Therefore, to understand learners' e-learning experiences and explain the forms of possible (macro-) and (micro-) structural influence on their learning experiences, it is necessary to employ a powerful tool to examine the interplay between two sets of power: structural properties and human reflexivity. Archer's critical realist social theory (1995, 1998, 2000a, 2007) enables this to be achieved at both the theoretical and analytical levels, as manifested in learners' experiences.

4.2 Structure and agency in an e-learning context: analytical dualism and the morphogenetic approach

The problem of structure and agency is not only a central dilemma in social theory but also one of the most pressing problems of the human condition. In this research, to examine the interplay of structure and agency in e-learning contexts as manifested in learners' learning experiences is particularly meaningful in "identifying contextual constraints upon our freedoms and specifying strategic uses of our freedoms for social transformation" (Archer, 1998:203).

In criticizing the 'mutual constitution' in Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984), the central tenet in critical realist social theory is that there are two sets of emergent properties pertaining to agency and structure, those of object and subject. They are radically different in kind, irreducible to each other but also inextricably intertwined.

> I want to distinguish sharply then between the genesis of human actions, lying in the reasons, intentions and plans of human beings, on the one hand; and structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other.
>
> (Bhaskar, 1989:79)

This insistence upon ontological distinction implies a methodology based upon analytical dualism, where explanation of why things social are so and not otherwise depends upon an account of how the properties and powers of the 'people' causally intertwine with those of the 'parts' (Archer, 1995). Therefore, it is believed that there are emergent properties that can be upheld as pertaining to society *sui generis* without denying it is only through activities of human beings that the causal power of social structures are efficacious. This point of

the activity-dependence of social structure appears very close to Giddens' stance that structural properties only become real when instantiated by actors. However, there is an important difference which contributes to the real distinctiveness of the critical realist approach. For Giddens, "structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity" (Giddens, 1984:26). Thus, structural properties depend upon current activities and the knowledgeability of contemporary agents about what they are doing. Critical realists challenge this argument by asking upon *whose* activities the development of a particular structure depended. The answer supplied is that "the *past activities* of agents (possibly now dead), the then emergence of such properties and powers cannot be attributed to practices of *current agents*, who can maintain and transform the above, rather than creating them, but whose strategic actions are conditioned by their inherited structural and cultural context in so doing" (Archer, 1998:201). This means that at any moment of time "society pre-exists the individual" (Bhaskar, 1989:77). And society is both the condition and outcome of human agency and human agency both reproduces and transforms society (Bhaskar, 1989). In other words, we are all born into an ongoing tradition/structural and cultural context we did not create, but as a (unintended) result of the activities from a particular former generation/cohort of actors. We are always reproducing or transforming our social inheritance.

Therefore, distinctive discontinuities in the structuring/restructuring process are introduced in the critical realist approach, where two sets of powers work 'out of synchrony': (i) structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) leading to its reproduction or transformation; (ii) structural elaboration necessarily post-dates the action sequences which gave rise to it (Archer, 1995:15). It is on these two basic propositions that the morphogenetic/morphostatic cycles have been put forward as the practical complement of social realism and that supply a genuine

method of conceptualizing the interplay between structure and agency over time. (Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3; where $T^{1...4}$ represent the temporal separability of structure and agency over different time periods in the morphogenesis cycles.)

<u>Structural conditioning</u>
T^1

<div align="center"><u>Social interaction</u></div>

T^2 T^3

<div align="right"><u>Structural elaboration</u></div>

T^4
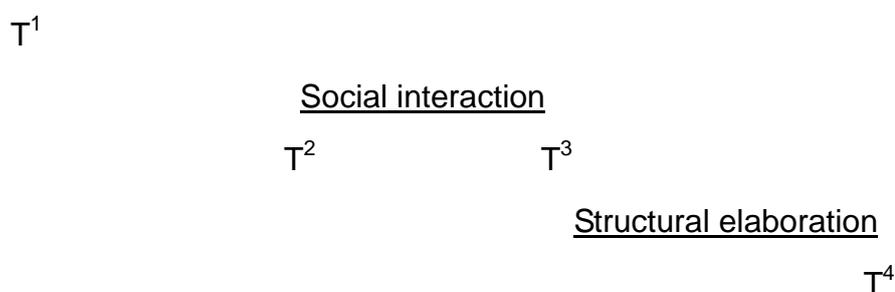
Figure 4.1 Archer's morphogenesis of structure. (1995 :193)

<u>Cultural conditioning</u>
T^1

<u>Social -cultural interaction</u>

T^2 T^3

<u>Cultural elaboration</u>

T^4
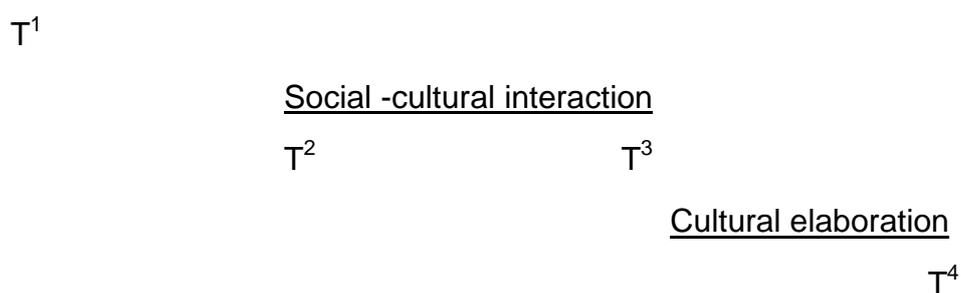
Figure 4.2 Archer's morphogenesis of culture. (1995:193)

Socio-cultural
<u>conditioning of groups</u>
T^1

<u>Group interaction</u>

T^2 T^3

<u>Group elaboration</u>

T^4
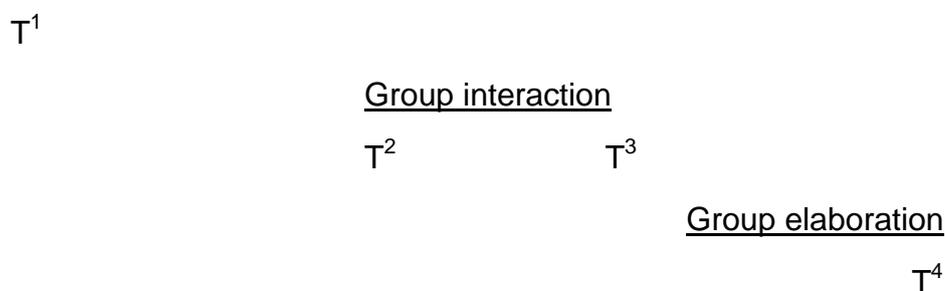
Figure 4.3 Archer's morphogenesis of agency. (1995:194)

As shown in the figures above, for the purpose of analysis each of these three cycles is relatively autonomous, dealing respectively with emergent properties in the analysis of structure, culture and agency. Yet they are actually always interacting with each other and continuously operative in society. According to Archer (1995), by breaking up the flows into intervals and connecting up with anterior and posterior analytical cycles, depending on the problem in hand, and its accompanying periodisation, the approach enables explanations of specific forms of structural elaboration to be advanced. Structural and cultural stability and change are not the focal point in this particular study, given the scale and time span over which the research takes place. However, the approach is still found to be profitable in guiding the study's data collection and analysis.

Firstly, traditionally, there is a divide in works at different levels of analysis in social science: micro analysis concentrates on the more personal and immediate aspects of social interaction in daily life whilst macro analysis focuses on the larger-scale more general features of society such as organizations, institutions and culture (Layder, 1994). To the social realists, however, it is argued that this divide is misleading and there is no 'micro' world (day-to-day doings) isolated from the 'macro' (socio-cultural) context (Archer, 1995). I agree with this observation, given the nature of society as an open system, there is no single factor that exerts its influence in any straightforward way. It must be considered together with the issues from other aspects of the contexts. Chinese adult learners' experiences of e-learning, as examined in this study, do not just happen in an e-learning environment but within the Chinese educational system, which also embedded in China's particular socio-cultural environment. Therefore, the study of this phenomenon calls for a tool that makes crucial linkages between the 'micro' and the 'macro' contexts to examine their interplay and interconnection. As seen in the figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3, the three cycles intersect in their middle element since the morphogenetic

sequence is only efficaciously possible upon human beings as active agents through their social interaction. Therefore, the traditional divide between micro and macro in analysis is overcome and the examination of emergent properties at all 'levels' separately, but also their mutual impact and import on social interaction, is achieved. This fulfills the purpose of this research to examine how learners' personal power causally intertwines with structural and cultural properties at different levels as manifested in their e-learning experiences.

Moreover, the discontinuities in the structuring/restructuring process make the analytical distinction between "before" (T1), "during" (T2 to T3) and "after" (T4). It is thus possible for the identification of some pre-existing features of social structure and culture that have shaped the particular social situation in which learners find themselves, yet without being biased by learners' personal values and practices. The stratified nature of reality thus introduces a necessary historicity (however short the time period involved) for explanations (Archer, 1998) and such enquiry must start from some previous point at which structural and cultural elements are treated as given. Therefore the reviewed literature on the Chinese philosophical tradition of learning can be utilised along with the analysis of other issues from the socio-cultural context, such as national policy in e-learning, e-learning material resources and infrastructures in Chinese higher education institutions, the demand for life-long learning opportunities, and so on. There are also structural properties at the micro-level of structure, such as institutional policy, course design, teaching and assessment arrangements, which also pre-exist learners' involvement in the courses. The relations between these 'component elements' in structural system constitute the reality in which learners will find themselves. From a critical realist's perspective, there is natural necessity of the internal relationships among these structural and cultural properties, as emergent properties. Thus, the morphogenetic approach provides a means of indentifying the logical

relationships among these relevant items populating different levels of the structural and cultural realms, which are independent of what current learners know, feel or believe about them. Therefore, I can not identify structures solely by interviewing the learners. It is necessary to bring in accounts from different perspectives, including the course tutors, administrators and course designers, combined with my own field observations, as well as the study of relevant documents.

Therefore, it is my contention that Archer's morphogenetic approach has provided a systematic, rigorous and explicit tool to guide the data collection and analysis in this study. By examining the confluence of the three sets of emergent properties and theorizing how their generative powers interlock with each other and impact upon learners' e-learning experiences, it is expected that a firm and coherent account can be generated in answering the research questions.

4.3 Research strategy and methods

4.3.1 Case studies

Yin (1994) describes a case study as one which examines a phenomenon in its real-life context and suggests that it is a particularly useful approach to adopt when it is difficult to draw clear boundaries between the phenomenon and the context within which it occurs. "In other words, you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (Yin, 1994:13). One of the central contentions of this study has been that e-learning is embedded in complex socio-cultural contexts and learners' e-learning experiences are an inseparable part of their whole life experiences. The contextual elements are thus of great significance in understanding the experiences of learners, thereby fulfilling precisely the conditions described by

Yin. The strength of case studies for the recognition of the complexity and 'embeddedness' of social truths (Adelman et al, 1980) is thus attractive to this research. Moreover, Stake (1995) argues that the best use of case study is to add existing experience and humanistic understanding, which also serves the purpose of this investigation.

A 'case' may be an individual, an institution, an event or, as in this case, a programme (Yin, 1994). A 'collective case study' is described as a variety of individual cases that are purposefully sampled because of their variety, range, contradictions or complexity (Stake, 1995). Two cases are chosen for this research: One is the WeSU (a Sino-UK e-learning initiative) MA programme for in-service teachers and the other is the on-line Bachelor Degree Programme at JN University. The reason for choosing these two cases is that they are typical examples of two kinds of e-learning programme currently found in Chinese Higher Education Institutions. One is mainly designed by Western e-learning practitioners but delivered in a Chinese context and the other is both designed and delivered locally. Moreover, one of the main foci of the study is how learners interact with the different learning designs that are part of their e-learning environment. These two cases representing two different origins in learning design are thus chosen with the expectation that they will generate a wide range of learner experience. This approach to sampling allows the researcher to obtain a degree of generalisability – an aspect of case studies that is often problematic - by comparing two distinct institutional cases.

It must not be thought that the purpose of examining these two cases is simply to identify differences between the two programmes or simply to compare their effectiveness. A key intention of this research is to explore and explain the possible socio-cultural influences on Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences. One of the values in using two cases, therefore, is that it does allow greater confidence in making generalizations from the findings of the study. The two cases are different in terms of the origins of the programme design – as described above – but they are also similar in that the learners in both cases are Chinese in a Chinese context, thereby sharing a broadly similar

cultural context with its possible implications for learning. It will be important, however, not to assume such cultural similarities but, rather, to investigate them, while at the same time being sensitive to cultural differences that may exist between the two contexts, programmes and groups of participants. Summation of the data from the two studies is, therefore, equally as important as differentiation between them.

4.3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data for the WeSU case come from a study in which the researcher was part of a project team which was jointly responsible for designing the data collection methods and instruments. In contrast, design of the JN research was entirely the researcher's responsibility. This has led to some differences in the approaches that were adopted in the two case studies. It could be argued that in order to make a comparison between the JN and WeSU cases, the methodologies of the two studies and the data collected from them should be identical. This is seen as being unnecessarily limiting, however, and the guiding principle in designing the JN study is one of obtaining data that will allow comparison with the WeSU data, but without being restricted by this condition. The comparability principle does suggest that there should be some methodological similarities between the two studies so that similar data should be collected by similar means, but this does not preclude the collection of further data that might enrich the second study and meet better the particular aims of the research as a whole. The latter point is important since these aims are not identical to those of the WeSU project.

Questionnaire

The physical separation between students and teachers in distance education affects not only the students' experience but also how research is carried out into students' experience (Richardson, 2000). This concern can be more acute when the researcher is separated by a great distance from the situation where the study is carried out, as in this case.

The use of a questionnaire in a study which claims to be essentially qualitative in nature may seem unusual. It must be pointed out, however, that quantitative data are not being collected here in order to test any hypotheses or prior assumptions. Rather, the survey serves as the first instrument to gather general background information about the learners and the ways they are using technology in their learning within the context of this case study, and it provides a description of the key characteristics of the learners, including reasons for taking the course, their expectations of it and aspects of their experience of e-learning. Such a broad characterisation of the learners is a pre-requisite for any valid comparisons to be made between the two programmes. Moreover, the open questions included in the questionnaires also allow learners to describe their general attitudes and feelings in response to the demands of the two programmes. Furthermore, data from questionnaire also allow the identification of appropriate individuals to participate in the qualitative phases of the research, particularly in the JN case study.

In the WeSU case, one questionnaire was designed for completion by students at the start of the course as baseline data and another was designed and completed by participants of the focus group interviews. There are five parts in the first questionnaire (Appendix I): questions 1-3 in Part I collects learners' personal information, such as gender and age; Questions 4-7 gathers information on participants' access to a computer, the internet, and a printer; Q8-10 asked about their use of computers at work (in schools); and finally Q11-20 are questions regarding participants' experiences of e-learning, their expectations, motivations, concerns and training needs for studying in the programme. These questions address the research question 1, 2 and 3 as outlined in Chapter 1. The questionnaire for learners in the focus group (Appendix III) is used to gather their general experience of studying in the programme, such as the time they spent on each unit, how they felt about the course content, time suggested and the introduction to the course. This information was interpreted with the focus group interviews carried out later. These questions supply information to answer research questions 1, 2 and 3.

Due to the length of the course in the JN case (3-4years), it was not possible to track changes and make a comparison between the course start and end within the same sample population. A cross-sectional rather than a longitudinal approach was therefore adopted. This means data were obtained from learners at different stages of the programme by making the questionnaire available to all those who are enrolled across all years of the programme. In this case, the questionnaire was web-based, with all learners enrolled on the programme being notified of its existence and how to access it, and encouraged to complete it. This does mean that the sample of respondents was opportunistic and may therefore be inadequate in terms of numbers or unrepresentative of the learners as a whole. Therefore, multiple methods of distributing the questionnaire were used, such as sending the link to the questionnaire through email, and posting the questionnaire on the course website, to maximize the number of responses. The usual assurances related to anonymity and confidentiality of responses were given (and ensured in practice) but individuals were asked to volunteer to participate in the follow-up qualitative data collection tasks, to be described below.

In their discussion of using web-page-based surveys, Mann and Stewart (2000) have this to say: "Web-page-based survey offers significant advantages in terms of reach, speed and economy…it is also easy for respondents to complete…the data received by the researcher are in a completely predictable and consistent format, making automated analysis possible." On the other hand, they also point out that respondents are not homogeneous in terms of their familiarity with Web usage. Given that the respondents are all enrolled in online learning programmes in this study, they are assumed to have basic skills of internet browsing. However, a disadvantage relating to the technical knowledge required to set up the survey was experienced by the researcher. The problems of web-based survey identified by Smith (1997) were experienced by the researcher: it was very time-consuming to learn to use a survey creation programme available to create an online survey and there was also a problem

with the programme being able to recognize Chinese characters, which could not be sorted out in time. Moreover, the programme identified was not supported by the university server, which led to another practical problem to be overcome. Furthermore, Mann and Stewart (2000) warn that it can be difficult to prevent multiple submissions by the same person. There were several questionnaires judged to be in this category from the responses. They were identified by their ID address and the duplicates were deleted.

There are five parts in this web-based questionnaire (Appendix IV): the first part (Q1-6) addresses background information of learners; the second part of the questionnaire (Q7-13) is about computer/internet availability, accessibility and skills; the third part (Q14-17) asks for learners' expectations and motivations of coming to study in the programme; the fourth part of the questionnaire (Q18-21) is designed to probe learners' understanding of the concept of learning and the role of the teacher; the last part (Q22-27) asks learners' general experiences of learning in the programme and that includes the course content and structure, the use of technologies, interaction and communication with teachers and peer students, difficulties come across, etc. This information addresses all four research questions.

Individual Interviews and focus groups
It is always challenging to find a balance between interview methods, which give participants enough freedom to raise their voice, and those which allow the interviewer to pursue her own research enquires. In this research, it was essential to encourage participants to provide their own detailed narrative, interpreting their understanding of their experiences which are meaningful and salient to them without pigeon-holing them into standardize categories. On the other hand, the researcher also has some ideas in advance of which topics to pursue –such as what learners' beliefs, concerns and motivations are and how they are influenced by e-learning and socio-cultural contexts; how they experience the e-learning design and learning technology, how they have been

interacting with teachers and peer students. A semi-structured interview scheme was thus designed around these main topics to provide the interviews with an overall framework but allowing learners' own stories to go through in much depth-detail during the process.

When less structured interviewing methods are adopted, there is a shift in the control of the focus of the research away from the researcher towards the users. Creanor et al (2006) argue that in this kind of interview the challenges for the interviewer are to follow rather than to lead. I would argue that an interview is essentially a social interaction between two people and, as such, its nature is dependent on both participants. Thus it is important to employ a form of interview in which the interviewer and the participants can engage in a dialogue that flows from the interviewee's answers, and allows the interviewer to probe more deeply into issues introduced into the dialogue by the interviewee. Interviews are susceptible to the same factors that influence the 'success' of any interactions between two people; factors which determine the extent to which people actually manage to communicate effectively. In this sense, there 'is no one right way of conducting an interview' (Clark,1999:73). Different people might need different skills to be encouraged to tell their stories in detail. Moreover, the quality of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee becomes even more crucial for the production of reliable information. At the heart of this interview process is the need to develop trust and understanding between interviewer and interviewee (Denscombe, 1998).

Besides individual interviews, focus-group interviews were also used to allow different experiences and aspects of learning to be discussed. This method also works as a form of triangulation to validate and reflect on the information gathered from individual learners. Apart from learners, individual interviews were also conducted with tutors, teacher assistant (the JN case), course designers and administrators. The information gathered has helped me reach a more thorough and in-depth understanding of the learning contexts, compared with learners' accounts alone. In the WeSU case study, three face-to-face

individual interviews were conducted with Chinese management representatives in March 2005 and four focus group interviews with learners. In the JN case, 13 individual interviews were conducted with learners plus a focus group interview, as well as five interviews with tutors, and three with teaching assistants. Another individual interview and focus group interview with course designers and administrators were also completed in March 2006. The interviews schedule with learners were designed around the four main research questions: learners' beliefs, motivation, commitment to learn; their experiences of the course design and other aspects in course organization and delivery; their perception and use of technologies as well as their interactions with teachers and peer students. The interviews with course designers and administrators were designed around these main areas to address research questions 2, 3 and 4 from different perspectives.

Audio self reporting diaries

Research on e-learning in higher education to date often depends for its data on end-of-course evaluation questionnaires (Sharp et al, 2005), meaning we know very little about what students think about their learning at the start or during the process. Students' private thoughts are not often reported in the usual course evaluations, where students also tend to give more positive responses (Hara and Kling, 1999).

One of the key concerns of this research is to reveal students' thoughts and experiences when they are learning in online programmes in natural settings. Given this consideration students' diaries are a profitable method because was expected to capture which learners' experiences and interactions are significant to them while the course is on-going rather than recalling and reflecting in interviews afterwards. This has been demonstrated in some research evaluating learners' online learning experience in the U.K. (e.g. Timmis et al. 2004). The use of a diary method was expected to elicit some 'private thoughts' such as beliefs and intentions as well as other issues affecting students'

learning in natural settings, which was nearly impossible by other means such as interviews or even observation. Both the reliability and validity of data collected by this method were expected to be greater in certain respects than those collected by other methods. Reliability is increased by the closeness in time between experiences and their being recorded; validity is enhanced through the control that the learners have over the selection of what is meaningful to them in their records.

However, as Bell (1987) points out the drawback of this method is that completing a diary is time-consuming. Bearing this in mind, a digital form of audio diary is a solution, to reduce the workload to which participants must commit themselves. Moreover, the digital recorders given to the participants were easy to carry so that they could record their diary anywhere at their convenience. Also, because of the distance between the researcher and the participants, this form makes the collection of diary entries by the researcher easier.

Eight participants were identified, mostly from among the interviewees. After conversations with the interviewees, some initial judgements of the possibilities were made based on the enthusiasm shown towards the research topic by the participants and their willingness to express themselves and communicate with others. These participants were approved to keep a digital diary of their study over one-semester, download their diary to computers and send to the researcher through the internet. The anonymity and confidentiality of the information provided were assured to all of the participants. Among these, seven participants made several diary entries across the semester whilst one withdrew. In total, there were 75 entries from seven participants, with entry lengths varying from a few seconds to a dozen minutes. These digital diaries have provided vivid snapshots of participants' learning and working as well as personal lives. More importantly, it has allowed me to follow up with these participants' progress in studying in the programme after I left the field. Some significant events recorded and reported through these learners' digital diaries have helped me interpret other qualitative data, such as interviews and to

achieve a comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences of this e-learning programme.

Observations

As noted previously, not all contextual causes can be revealed to subjects' consciousness. Therefore, social realists insist that we do not uncover real social structures by interviewing people in-depth about them (Archer, 1998). Observation is a useful technique to generate data that would capture a range of dimensions of the social world in its natural setting (Mason, 2002).

During the time of my field work in the two cases, several non-focussed, non-systematic observations of a variety of activities and events were carried out. Some events were chosen to be observed for their significance within the learning programme; for instance, the video-conference induction to programme study, and the opening ceremony in the e-learning institution for the newly enrolled e-learners. Some events and activities, however, were chosen for their potential to represent regular programme activities, such as the on-line lectures. The observation took the form of partial immersion in the programme context to achieve a better understanding of that context and to promote more sensitive analysis and understanding of data collected more systematically in other ways. Besides these observations, some informal discussions with the course designers and administrators were also used to supplement the data collection. The data collection activities are summarized in table 4.1, on the following page.

All the individual and focus group interviews and learners' digital diaries were transcribed. Apart from these, information on the researcher's own interpretations and thinking, in the form of field notes, memos, and diary has also become a legitimate object of subsequent analysis. The analysis started from reading through all these transcripts, field notes and reports to make myself completely familiar with the information they contained. Some preliminary distinctions within these data were drawn at this stage and the data

Table 4.1 Summary of data collection activities

Instrument	Case	Who	When	How	Where	Number
Questionnaire	WeSU	Learners	2005.3-4	Face-to-face	Yanjing, Beidu	87
	JN	Learners	2006.3-5	On-line	Web	250/2429
Individual Interviews	JN	Learners, Tutors, Teaching Assistants, Course designers	2006.3	Face-to-face	JN	22
Focus group interviews	WeSU	Learners	2005.4	Face-to-face	Yanjing, Beidu	4
	JN	Learners, Course designers	2006.3	Face-to-face	JN	2
Learners' diary	JN	Learners	2006.3-7	Digital Form	JN	8
Informal Discussions, Reports	WeSU	e-Tutors, Course designers	2005.3-5	Face-to-face	England	3 Reports 5 Discussion
	JN	Management representatives	2006.3	Face-to-face	JN	8 Discussion
Observations	WeSU	Learners, e-tutors and course designers	2005.3-5	Face-to-face	Yanjing, Beidu	4
	JN	Learners, lecturers, Course manager and administrators	2006.3	Face-to-face	JN	8

were organized into broad categories that drew on the prior reading of the relevant literature and interpretive framework adopted in this research. Such

broad distinctions include categories such as personal beliefs and motivation, course design and structure, perception and use of technology, teacher & learner interaction, learners' group interaction, etc.

The analysis went two ways from here: one was towards more refined sub-catgorizations within these broad categories, identified by going through the data bit-by-bit to ensure the category list is sufficiently comprehensive; the other way was to establish the links and connections between those broad categories, identified using the morphogenetic approach introduced above.

Through this process of analysis, the important and essential features of Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences under investigation and the learners' interplay with the socio-cultural context and e-learning settings could be identified as emergent themes. The final stage of the analysis was to integrate the major themes identified and produce a reasoned account to answer the research questions.

Dey (1993) argues that to produce a valid account, we need to be objective. This does not mean being omniscient and knowing 'what really happened', but taking account of evidence without forcing it to conform to one's own wishes and prejudices, and accepting the possibility of error. Given the volume and complexity of the qualitative data collected, I had to be selective. However, the selection exposes the analysis to the danger of neglect or misinterpretation of the data because "we tend to see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear (Dey, 1993)." This concern is also raised by Miles and Huberman (1984), who argue that most people act as rotten scientists and rely heavily on pre-existing beliefs, and making bias-ridden judgements. When this is the case, we make more of the evidence that confirms our beliefs, and pay less attention to any evidence that contradicts them (Dey, 1993). Therefore, it is necessary for

us be aware of our bias in selecting and analyzing the data in qualitative research. There are certain questions implied in the process of data collection and analysis in this study, such as: Do I tend to accept uncritically the word of authority? Do I tend to pay more heed to my own interests and suspect the word and motives of others? Am I making rational or emotional judgements? Besides this, the quality of data has also been assessed for its reliability and validity. Cross-case comparison is found useful here, where I can see how reliable the observations are in different situations. Apart from these techniques, the assessment of the empirical scope of the data and its conceptual significance has also been employed. It has to be noted, however, that these are related techniques and should not been used in isolation. For instance, when the weight of a piece of information is slight – perhaps because the frequency assigned to this particular category is low - it calls for reassessment of its significance to the analysis overall. Yet the event or information revealed might be remarkable in conceptual terms because it illustrates an unusual but significant point in understanding the situation or contexts. In this case, the data are not selected simply on the basis of their frequency of occurrence in the transcript but also on the power arising from their conceptual significance.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in the planning and implementation of this research are guided by the BERA ethical guidelines. No unusual ethical problems were anticipated while the following ethical issues were considered carefully and acted upon.

All subjects of the research must give their consent based on accurate and adequate information as to the purpose and nature of the research and possible means by which findings will be made public. Of course, the story is not that simple. In Case one, the persuasive influences which operated on people when

these in-service teachers were asked to take part in the research by their employers have been recognised. In this case, attempts have been made to renegotiate consent in interviews to make sure the interviewees become more fully informed about what consenting to the interview actually means and avoid any pressure on participants to contribute under duress or against their free will. Similarly, the ethical issues related to observation, which constitutes part of my field practice, also need to be considered carefully. For instance, in the JN case, for practical reasons, I have first to gain consent from the institutional level to observe the on-line lecturing and on-line discussion forums. This entails dynamic power relationships between me as researcher introduced by the institution and learners and teachers as participants to be observed. It is unrealistic to assume that the researcher can maintain a completely neutral stance in the development of relationships in the setting (Mason, 2002). Therefore, it is important not only to gain 'acceptance' from all those involved, but to develop trust, respect and mutual disclosure during the process. The field work has greatly benefited from such careful ethical consideration and trusting relationships established in the field.

Individual respondents should have the right to see anything that is written about them, including the researcher's interpretations of data obtained from them, and they should have the right to clarify or challenge these interpretations. This is good practice not only for ethical reasons but from the point of view of increasing the reliability and validity of the data and their interpretation. When the preliminary data analysis was completed in the JN case, a report was sent to some learners-interviewees and the course manager to be distributed across the School of Distance Education (SoDE) at JN university. This is a way to enhance the validity of the account drawn from the data by having the subjects' comment on the authenticity of it. The suggestions given have been used to modify my analysis. However, one has to be aware that the validity of the account should not depend on subjects' acceptance of these comments. Respondents should accept that in the end the researcher has the right to make

her own interpretations of the data obtained, even if they disagree with these interpretations. Together with this right on my part goes the responsibility to ensure that all work is carried out to the highest professional standards and that all data and arguments derived from them are presented and are defensible.

There is a wide range of interests involved in the research, which includes myself as researcher, my supervisor, the people and the institutions connected with my data sources in different ways. Recognizing the potential implications for these parties and interests is an essential ethical and moral consideration in guiding the research.

Confidentiality and anonymity must be promised and maintained in the reporting of data and their analysis. Yet, it can be quite difficult to fulfill such promises given the full, rich and personal nature of the data generated from qualitative research. There may be individuals for whom it is difficult to guarantee complete anonymity; for example, course designers, who may be identifiable by those who are familiar with either of the two programmes simply because there are likely to be only one or two people with such a position. If this is the case, then either they must agree to accept this or I must take care to disguise the programmes by, for example, using fictitious names for the universities involved. The implications of Data Protection Act (1998) particularly in respect to the storage and availability of the data have also been carefully considered.

Chapter 5

Quantitative Data Presentation and Analysis

In order to answer the research questions in the study, a questionnaire was employed as the first instrument to gather general background information about the learners and the ways they are using technology in their learning in this study. In this chapter, the findings from the questionnaires used in both cases will be presented, which will provide a description of the key characteristics of the learners and their backgrounds, including reasons for taking the course, their expectations of it and aspects of their experience of e-learning.

5.1 Case One - Needs analysis with participants of the WeSU case

In order to gain background information on learners in the WeSU case, the project ran a questionnaire at the beginning of the programme to probe learners' motivation, intentions, needs and concerns. The data obtained helps to answer the research questions 1, 2 and 3.

The WeSU pilot ran for a six-week period from 21st March to 30th April 2005. In total eighty-seven in-service teachers from six schools located in Yanjing, Wushun and Beidu participated in the pilot (Table 5.1). Eighty-two, or 94.25%, of the in-service teachers taking part in the pilot completed the questionnaires distributed in the course induction session.

5.1.1 The characteristics of WeSU participants

Nearly all of the respondents (96.3%) were qualified teachers of English. They

reported an average of just over nine years' teaching experience with 45% of them having ten years or more. Half of the participants were teachers from the senior secondary sector; nearly 30% were from the junior secondary sector and less than 20% were from the primary sector. All of them held a first degree or above; all who responded to this question reported an English level of Professional English test band four or CET band six[3].

Table 5.1 School and participants allocation (n=82)

School	N	%	Location
• Red Temple Secondary School	19	23.2	Wushun
• Wushun No. 3 Secondary School	5	6.1	Wushun
• Yangsong Secondary School	1	1.2	Wushun
• Yanjing No.7 Secondary School	10	12.2	Yanjing
• Yanjing No. 5 Secondary School	15	18.3	Yanjing
• Beidu Shiyan School	32	39.0	Beidu

95% of the participants were under 40 years old. It was clear from the questionnaires that most participants entered their teaching career in their twenties. Over 80% of the participating teachers were female; this was much higher than the 43.3% figure for the female teachers' ratio across all subjects nationally (Chinese Education Yearbook 2003).

---

[3] College English test band 4 & 6 – English level test for undergraduates of subject other than English: band 4 is for second year student and band 6 is taken before graduation.
Professional English test band 4 & 8, - English level test for undergraduates of English subject; band 4 for second year student, band 8 for final year students.

Table 5.2   Module being studied (n=82)

Module	N	%
Educational Psychology	27	32.9
Modern Pedagogy	27	32.9
Educational Technology	28	34.1

5.1.2 Access to a computer, internet and printer

All respondents reported being able to access a computer at home or work; about 80% of the participants reported being able to access a computer both at home and work, but over 30% of the participants reported having to share a computer with others, which caused problems in terms of the participants getting sufficient access to machines to be able to study for the module. An average of 7.34 hours was spent on study per week.

The situation of internet access at work is similar to that of computer access for these participants. However, it is noteworthy that internet access at home is much lower than computer access, as well as the access at working places. The limitation on internet access at home might have a negative impact on their learning while out of the working places if the learning materials have to be accessed on-line. Over 70% of the participants reported having ISDN/broadband Internet connections. However, on the second visit it was found that their Internet connections were not very reliable in the Beidu school site. A good number of URL links were blocked by local (educational) authorities and some of the participants were living in areas where Internet access was provided (and controlled) by the school or local educational system.

Half of the participants reported not having a printer at home, while 89% of them

had one at work. However, it has been pointed that there were restrictions on them printing the course material at their working places. It was therefore difficult for those participants who preferred to read the materials in hard copies.

5.1.3 ICT skills and the use of computers in teaching/learning

The participants were familiar with text editing and presentation applications such as MS Word and PowerPoint, reflecting the major use of computers in their teaching which was for making and presenting or displaying course material. They were also familiar with using the Internet to search for information to produce course materials and presentations.

53% of the participants used email to communicate on a regular basis and over one third reported participating in online chat frequently but did not have much experience of posting to discussion boards. This is suggesting that online group discussions or debates would be a new experience. A few participants had some online learning experience but not with using a VLE, suggesting that the induction programme needed to include support on how to use the VLE and mechanisms to enable them to become more familiar and comfortable with the course's pedagogic model.

Over half of the participants reported using a computer between 1-4 hours a day, above 30% reported using a computer less than one hour a day, and less than 10% using a computer more than 4 hours a day, or less than 1-2 hours a week. Overall, they were fairly modest about their general level of computer experience, their knowledge of the internet and email, while feeling short of experience of using online learning environments.

Most of the participants reported the availability of computers for use in their teaching although 40.2% of them reported they had problems using them.

Equipment shortages and failure, and poor quality of the equipment were major issues, followed by time limitations or heavy workloads and software applications failures. Other barriers mentioned included teaching content which was not tailored to the teacher's individual preferences or which was considered unsuitable for use in some other way. Cassettes, images and books remained the most frequently used resource for teaching; while there was also more than 60% of the participants who reported they use the internet frequently in daily teaching. Compared with these, computer lab and video have been much less used.

The participants reported that their school had provided computer skills training and training in the use of computers for teaching. Schools provided access to computers, and allowed teachers to take time off to receive training. However, more than half of the participants reported that support and training were insufficient; they believed they required more support and further training, including training in pedagogy, the application of educational theories and courseware design.

5.1.4 Experiences of online or distance learning courses

Only a quarter of the participants reported having attended some kind of online distance learning course, while the majority reported having no such experience.

About 15% of the participants, all from the Yanjing area stated that they had attended the 'Intel Future Educational Training'[4]. Two had experienced online learning which was available from a BSD affiliated secondary school education

---

[4] Intel Teach to the Future, a program launched in January 2000, is a worldwide effort to help teachers integrate technology into instruction and enhance student learning. (http://www.intel.com/community/china/education.htm)

website. However, there were no participants who had experience of learning online with a VLE.

5.1.5 The main reasons/expectations for participating in the WeSU modules

The most important reason the participants gave for taking part in this learning was their motivation to improve the quality of their teaching. There was an expectation that the module content was something they could directly or indirectly transfer to classroom teaching. Moreover, as teachers, they were keen to find new resources to use with their students. Beside these, the participants also expected that the course would enable them to undertake professional development for general self-improvement and skills upgrading.

Therefore, it is significant that the participants were anticipating they could 'learn new methods to improve the quality of teaching' from the course study, or improve their online learning skills, increase their level of English, and upgrade their computer skills. Interestingly, they also expected this course would provide an opportunity for them to communicate with other teachers in other regions so that they could exchange opinions on their teaching experience. The flexibility in terms of time that online learning provided and a general interest in this form of independent and flexible learning were also the attractions for them to take part in the course. There are a few participants, however, also expressed that they were particularly interested in obtaining a formal qualification. Despite these motivations just described, there were also a number of the participants (n=6) who reported that they were required to learn these modules by the school authority. It was evidenced that the way in which their school introduced them to the course, its aims and objects and relevance was likely to have a significant impact on the participants' perceptions of and attitude towards the course. Those teachers who were required by the school

authorities to learn these modules were not well motivated and were resistant to taking part in the programme, they perceived the programme to be a distraction from their teaching.

5.1.6 Concerns about the WeSU modules

The participants voiced their concern about workloads, time limitations, study load and the short period of time that the pilot was running. One of the strengths of online learning was considered to be its flexibility, but participants reported that it was hard to keep their studies high on their list of priorities, due to a range of conflicting pressures. Furthermore, for many of the participants this kind of learning was new to them – both in terms of working online and in terms of the pedagogical approach adopted. They felt that they needed time and support to enable them to adapt to this approach. However, as the pilot ran only for six weeks, this was deemed not long enough for them to develop the necessary skills, nor to benefit from their learning as much as they expected. However, the modules did provide them with an opportunity to learn and engage with practitioners in other organizations. There may therefore be a need to negotiate with participating schools for staff support in terms of time, equipment and other issues.

There were also concerns about the level of difficulty of the programme in terms of English language. The materials were not designed or intended for use in English. English versions of the materials were only used with Chinese teachers of English in order to enable UK colleagues to participate in the learning and engage with the participants. The relevance of the content, the participants' lack of previous experience of online learning and whether the level of their computer skills was adequate to follow the programme were also raised as concerns. The participants were also worried about the effectiveness of online learning versus face-to-face learning; they were particularly concerned

about the effectiveness of communication and getting timely feedback. Other issues included the availability of the equipment, technical support and whether they would be able to gain a certificate after completing the modules.

5.1.7 Training and support needs

The participants stated that they wanted training in network technology and computing skills, as well as guidance and support with online learning methods and English language. They expected the modules to provide rich teaching resources and some relevant and useful URLs of online resources and case studies, which they could apply in the classroom. They were particularly interested in materials and case studies, which were subject-specific to their area of teaching. They hoped that their schools would provide time off or flexibility of working time to enable them to undertake the course. However, there is a mismatch between the designers' intentions and the participants' expectations regarding the nature and content of the modules: the designers had never intended to provide the subject specific-resources that the participants had hoped for.

From the tutors, the participants expected timely feedback and good guidance. Despite being presented as an online learning course, they would have also liked to have regular face-to-face tutorials. They therefore wanted more direct, synchronous tutorial support, preferably face-to-face. Video-conferencing sessions could provide a means of building a closer relationship with tutors and meeting this need.

5.2 Case Two – Web-based Questionnaire with Participants at JN Programme

With a similar purpose to Case one, a link to the web-based questionnaire was attached in an email and sent to all students enrolled in the Online BA Programme at the SoDE at the University of JN by March 2006. There were 2,429 learners who received the email and a total of 242 valid responses were received, which gives a return rate of 9.9%.

The questionnaire included both open and closed questions. The qualitative data from the open questions were analysed and will be discussed together with qualitative data obtained from interviews and diaries, in the next chapter.

5.2.1 The Characteristics of JN Students

The respondents were from 25 (out of 30) study centres set up by SoDE across the country. Among these, near half of them (44.7%) were from JN centre, where the largest proportion of students is based. The respondents were studying in five different subjects in different academic years, with almost two-thirds (64%) being in the second year of their study.

Fifty six percent (56.6%) of the respondents were female which was slightly more than the male respondents (43.4%). The age distribution is given in Table 5.3. This age distribution indicates that over half of the students enrolled were in the 21-30 age group while there was also a certain number of more mature students (over 30) who had been attracted by the course and were studying for their degree here. Among these respondents, most of them (88%) had a full-time job.

Table 5.3: Age distribution of JN respondents

Age group	% of the Respondents
Below 20	0
21 – 30	68.2
31 – 45	25.2
41 – 50	6.6
Above 51	0

5.2.2 Computer/ Internet Access and Usage

Figure 5.1 Computer/Internet Access point
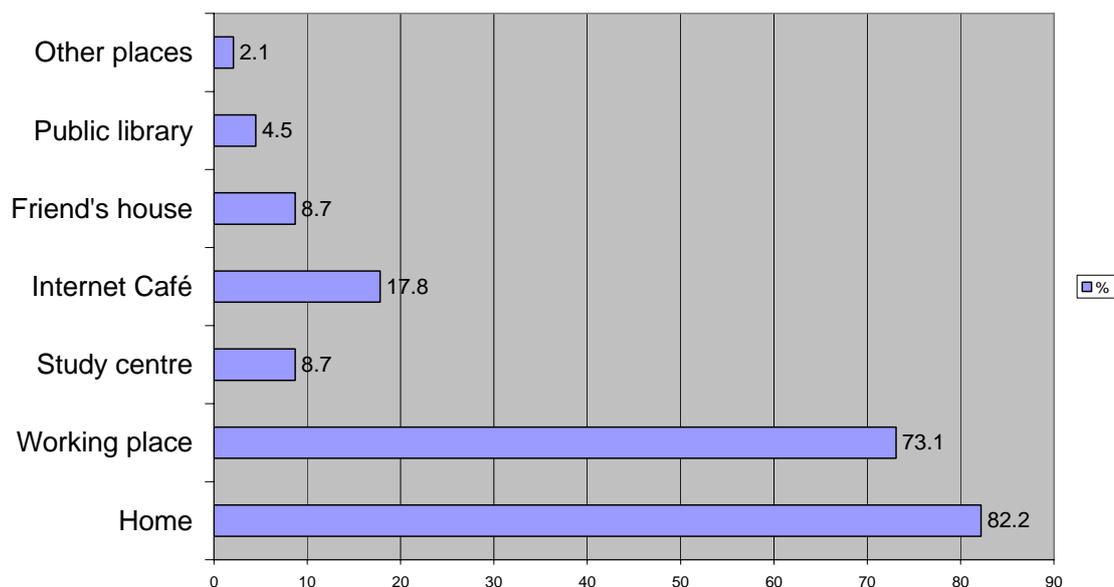
Figure 5.1 shows the availability of a computer and the internet for the learners. The figure illustrates that most of the respondents were able to get access to a computer and the internet at home and/or at the working place. The results also show computer and internet access were slightly higher at home than working places. Some public places, such as Internet cafés and public libraries, were also being used for computer/internet access by some students. Other places mentioned were hotels while travelling away from home. This shows that,

although a relatively smaller number, some participants still rely on public access to the computers/internet on some occasions.

Table 5.4 Hours/week spent in studying with computer/internet

Hours	% of the respondents
Less than 5	19.8
6 – 10	32.6
11 – 15	16.9
16 – 20	14
21 – 25	4.1
26 – 30	2.1
31 – 35	2.1
More than 35	8.3

Table 5.4 shows the data for the time the learners spent in studying with a computer/internet. This time varied from less than five to more than thirty hours per week. Over half of the respondents spent less than 10 hours a week studying this way. As mentioned above, most of the learners had a full-time job commitment, which could explain that why they only have a limited amount of time available for studying. At the same, it has to be recognised that this might not be the same with the overall time the learners spent in studying the course; it could also reflect some learner's preference for working off-line.

5.2.3 The Usage of Communicative Media

Q.10-12 were designed to approach the learners' usage of, attitudes towards and wishes about the communicative tools in studying in this course. As indicated below in Figure 5.2 over 70% of respondents expressed that they use email, on-line discussion forums and video/audio-lectures most regularly in

course study. Some synchronic communicative tools, such as telephone and instant messenger were also reported being used very often by some respondents, representing 39.7% and 37.6% in total respectively. Interestingly, although this is an on-line course, there were also 17.8% of the respondents who reported that they used face-to-face meetings very often to communicate.

Figure 5.2 Communicative Media Used
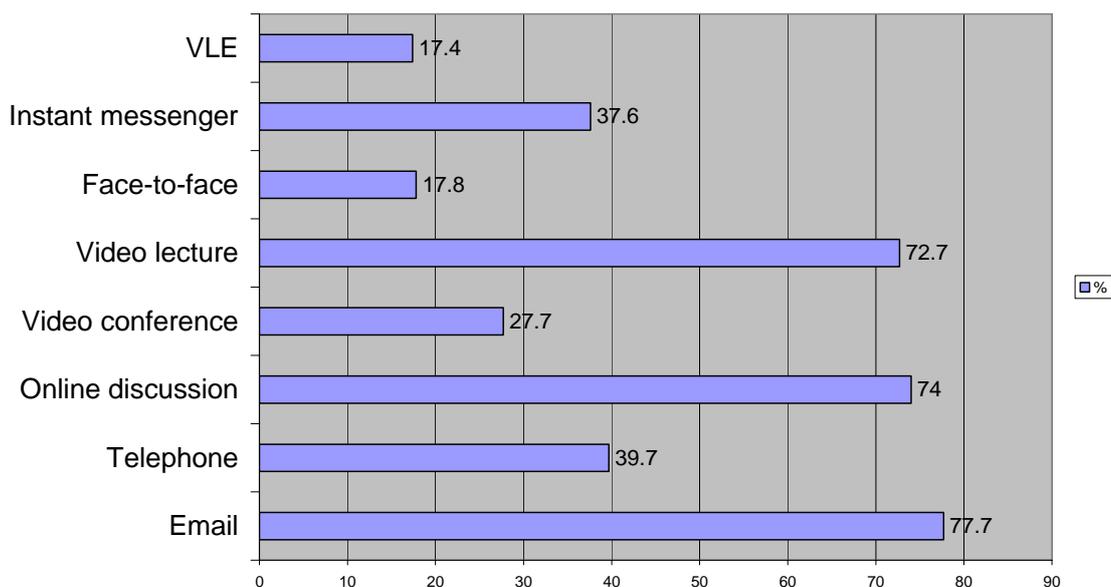
Figure 5.3 Media Most Helpful
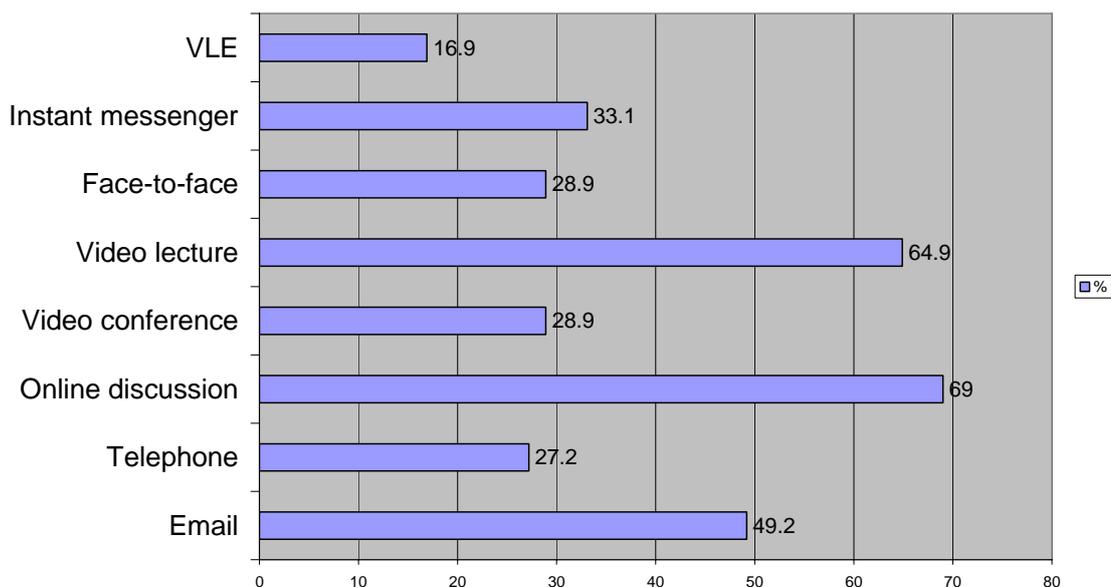
As showing in Figure 5.3, among all these communicative tools, on-line discussion forums and video/audio-lectures were thought by most respondents (more than half) to be most helpful to their study. In addition to these, email, which has been widely used by the learners, was deemed as one of the most helpful media for their study by near half of the learners. A substantial proportion (33%) of respondents believed that instant messenger was among the most helpful communicative tool to their study. Considering this is not a communicative tool embedded in the course and it is not necessary for the learners to use it for communication, this suggests that it had played an important role in students' learning experience. Due to the on-line nature of the course delivery method face-to-face meetings have probably not always been available for most of the learners as indicated in Figure 5.3. However, it was also appreciated by nearly 30% of respondents as one of the most helpful communicative tools to facilitate their learning. This is reinforced by the result of the question that followed. When asked what communication tools they have not been using to aid their learning in the course but want to try in the future, over half of the respondents indicated that they would like more face-to-face meetings and discussions, either with teachers or other students. Some respondents also showed their interest in using Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Video-conferencing and Instant Messenger in their future study.

5.2.4 Confidence of Using Computer/ Internet/ Software in the course/ Learning on-line

This question (Q013) embraces four items which express the students' confidence with respect to the use of computer, internet, the technology on the course and learning on-line, respectively. A five-point scale was used, from 1='strongly agree' to 5='strongly disagree'.

Table 5.5 Indication of Confidence

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q013_1	241	1	4	1.21	.492
Q013_2	237	1	4	1.24	.516
Q013_3	238	1	4	1.53	.721
Q013_4	239	1	5	1.49	.782
Valid N (listwise)	233				

As shown in Table 5.5, overall, these statements received very positive responses from the students with the means obtained all being lower than 2. The students were most confident in using computers (x=1.21) and the internet (x=1.24) whilst less sure about the technology employed in the course (x=1.53) and learning on-line (x=1.49). In Q013_4, there were a few students who disagree strongly with the statement that they are confident about learning on-line. The result suggests that students were acknowledging the difference between the general computing/internet skills and strategies of learning on-line. They did have some doubts about engaging in this form of learning.

5.2.5 Reasons/Concerns for Taking the JN Programme

Among all these 242 respondents, 86% of them were studying for the first time in an on-line course. As showing in Figure 5.4 below, the flexibility of time, place and learning pace were the main attractions to the participants to choose this form of learning. Given the fact that most of the learners have a full-time job, an on-line course does have the advantage that it allows them to combine the study with their work.

Figure 5.4 Why chose on-line course
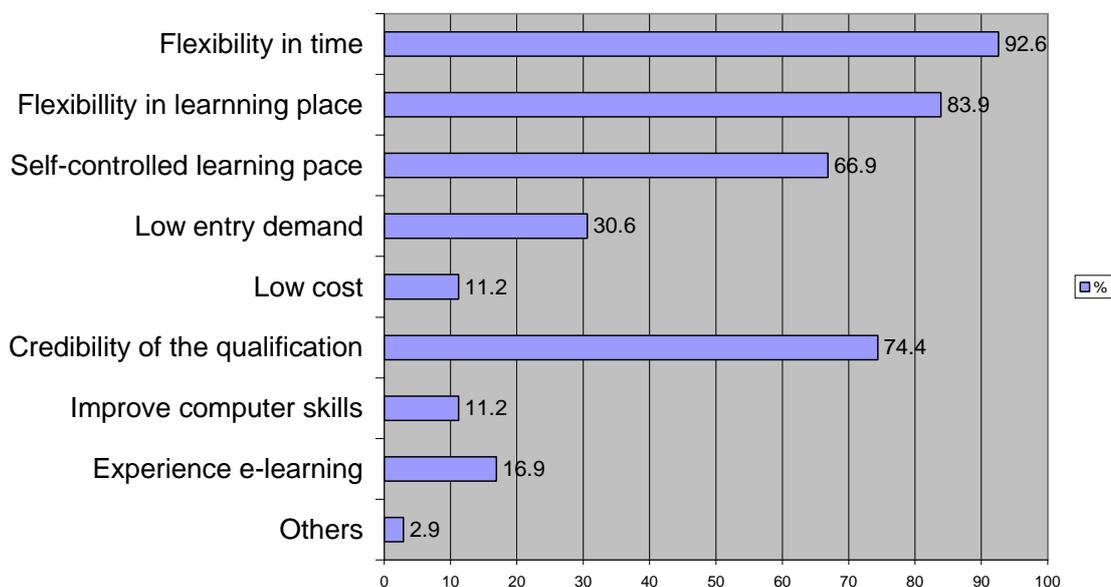
Apart from this, the credibility of the qualification provided by the course was obviously also one of the main considerations. There were relatively few people who showed particular interest in this particular way of course delivery – on-line – for its own sake.

Figure 5.5 Why taking this course
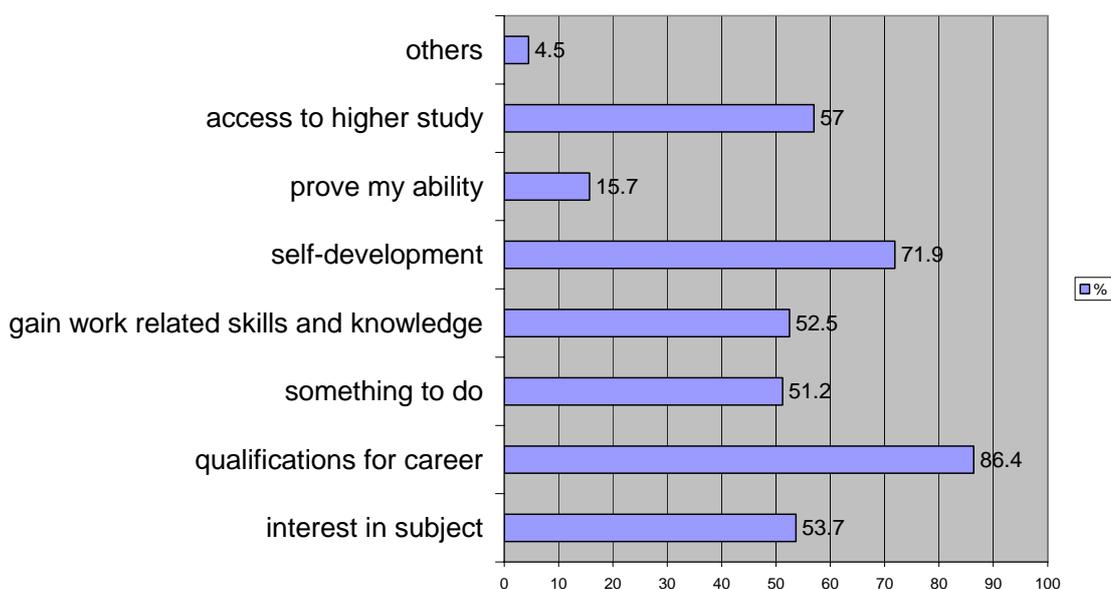
When asking students about their motivation for taking this particular course (Figure 5.5), two outstanding reasons came out from the questionnaire. In agreement with responses to the previous question, a very high proportion of the respondents were interested in gaining the qualification that would help with their future career.

At the same time, another striking motivation evidenced was gaining knowledge and improving themselves as a person. This result reflects that the aspiration for extrinsic rewards may coexist with the ideal of a person's internal establishment, in the CHC tradition. Besides these, over half of the participants were taking the course as a step to further academic study or because they were interested in the subject, or trying to develop work-related skills and knowledge to improve working efficiency or for making life more meaningful. It is interesting to note that the option, prove ability to friends or family, seemed to be dismissed by most students, which reflects the learning process advocated by Confucius as an inner-directed process, while the attitude of learning for the sake of pleasing others or showing off to others was criticized (see review in Chapter 2).

Echoing with this, their main concerns over taking an on-line course arose from the credibility of the qualification, the highest proportion of the respondents showed this in the questionnaire. Near half of the respondents were concerned with the quality of learning in this way and nearly one third of the participants had concerns about the teaching quality. Although it was a new way of learning for most of the respondents, not many of them seemed too worried about not being used to it.

Figure 5.6 Concerns of on-line courses
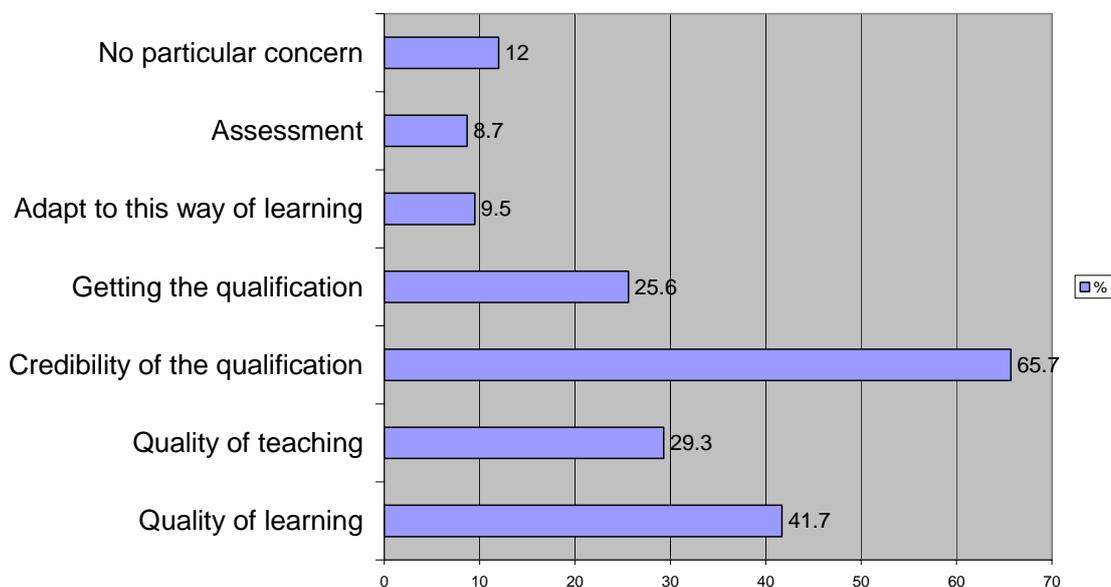
5.2.6 Understanding of Learning and Teacher's Role

The first group of questions under this category embraces eight statements (as shown in Table 5.6) with respect to the students' conceptions of learning. Students were asked to indicate to what extent these statements are close to their understanding of learning. Students' responses were gathered in a 5 point Likert-type scale running from 1=very close, 2=quite close, 3=not so close to 4= rather different and 5=very different.

The overall impression given by the data in Table 5.6 is of students who were positive towards the statements, with all 8 items have obtained means towards the positive side of the neutral (2.5).The most well received statements were posed by item Q018_2 and Q018_3, where there were 97.1% and 89.2% of the respondents respectively thinking these two statements were either very close or quite close to their understanding of learning. The coexistence of different understandings of the nature of learning is an interesting point to note. In some circumstances, for some respondents, learning is seen to be the accumulation of facts and information. But it does not seem to stop there; students do regard

learning as understanding, as posed by Q018_6, for which 80.7% of the respondents felt it was close to their understanding of learning.

Table 5.6 Descriptive Statistics

Learning is…	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q018_1making sure you remember the new knowledge	239	1	4	1.81	.688
Q018_2 building up knowledge by acquiring facts and information	241	1	3	1.51	.556
Q018_3 developing as a person	240	1	4	1.64	.689
Q018_4 using all your experiences in life	238	1	4	2.17	.837
Q018_5 being able to use the information you've acquired	238	1	4	1.92	.765
Q018_6 understanding new material for yourself	238	1	4	1.93	.723
Q018_7 getting on with the things you've got to do.	238	1	5	2.01	.849
Q018_8 seeing things in a different and more meaningful way	239	1	4	1.76	.696
Valid N (listwise)	234				

Learning as personal development was accepted by 89.2% respondents and also the similar aspiration can be found in Confucian philosophy of education as discussed in Chapter 2. Students showed some uncertainty about regarding learning as using all their life experiences and doing things better, with only around 30% of students disagreeing with these two statements. However, most students did agree that learning has a component of applying new knowledge to practice and seeing things differently.

With respect to students' perceptions of the extent to which this course has helped them achieve 'real learning', the result was obtained as shown in Table 5.7 in response to a five-point scale ranging from 1=not at all to 5=to great extent.

Table 5.7 Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q019	239	1	5	3.28	.824
Valid N (listwise)	239				

The mean obtained (3.28) is on the positive side of neutral (3) but somewhat lukewarm. The biggest proportion of responses fell in Point 3 which indicate that nearly half of the students were holding a neutral attitude towards this question. Overall, more people were positively disposed towards the course than were negative about it. Students might feel happy with the course in general terms while with expectations of lots improvements in specific aspects.

Table 5.8 Understanding of the teacher's role

Teacher's Role	% of the respondents
Transmit knowledge	52.1
Answer the questions	68.2
Design and provide the learning content	55
Provide the resources and consultancies	69.4
Facilitate students' learning	62
Control the learning environment	12.4
Pose questions to invoke students' thinking	51.2
Encourage students to develop study skills	61.6
Employ different teaching method to different students	46.7
Explore the new knowledge with students together	53.3

In the following question (Q020), students were asked to indicate their understanding of the teacher's role among the given options. The result as shown in Table 5.8 laid emphasis on providing learning resources and consultancy, helping students solve the problems, answering their questions and helping them develop learning skills. Although over half of the students believed that the teacher should design and provide learning content, slightly fewer students think the teacher should transmit the knowledge to them. Rather, the teacher was expected by most of them to facilitate students' learning by

posing questions to invoke students' thinking or even exploring the new knowledge together with students. Such expectations of teachers' roles highlight the need for a teacher in an e-learning environment to provide learners with rich learning resources, on-time feedback and sufficient opportunities to develop the skills needed.

Table 5.9 shows the results of the respondents' perceptions of the extent to which the teachers' role was fulfilled in the JN course, on a five-point scale from 1=not at all to 5=to a great extent. Overall, near half of the respondents (46.4%) held the neutral point view towards this question, contributing to a mean of 3.12. Although there were slightly more people (31.6%) who showed their dissatisfaction with the role performed by teachers from this particular course than those positive towards it (22%), given the small value of Standard Deviation (0.837), the opinions did not vary to any great extent across the sample.

Table 5.9 Students' perception of teacher's role in JN course

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q021	237	1	5	3.12	.837
Valid N (listwise)	237				

5.2.7 Experiences of course study

This section of the questionnaire asked students to respond to a set of 39 statements, with Likert-type response scales, intended to tap aspects of their experiences and perceptions of the course study. There were several main aspects of students experiences examined in this section: their perception of the course design, including content (Q22.37), structure (Q22.19, Q22.24, Q22.25), and assessment (Q22.23); their perception of the communication and

interaction with teachers (Q22.7, Q22.8, Q22.9, Q22.10, Q22.11, Q22.12, Q22.13, Q22.14); interaction and communication with other students (Q22.16, Q22.18); their understanding of demands of the course (Q22.1, Q22.2, Q22.6, Q22.15, Q22.18) practical issues (Q22.32, Q22.33) and their preference on different way of learning (Q22.4, Q22.21, Q22.22); their perception of using the technology in the course (Q22.27, Q22.28); and their overall experience of on-line learning (Q22.3, Q22.17, Q22.20, Q22.26, Q22.29, Q22.30, Q22.31, Q22.34, Q22.35, Q22.38, Q22.39).

The overall impression given by the data in Table 5.10 is of students who remain positive about their experiences, as examined in the questionnaire, with most of the mean values on the positive side of the neutral point (<3). Scores on Items Q22_11, Q22_19, Q22_25, Q22_27, Q22_30 were, of course, reversed. The strongest positive feelings can be found in Item Q22_6, mean=1.55, where 91.9% students either strongly agree or agree with the statement that they needed to be more self-directed in the course study. A similar feeling was reflected in Item Q022_1, (mean=1.85) where a large majority of students (84%) felt that the way they were expected to work on this course was different from their previous learning experience. Item Q022_16 also received a high level of agreement (mean=1.69, 89.3% gave positive response to this item), which shows students valued highly communication and interaction with other students.

Table 5.10 Students' experience on course study

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q022_1The way I was expected to work on this course was different to my former learning experience.	237	1.85	.983
Q022_2 This course concentrated on the subject content, on what I had to learn.	237	2.09	.802
Q022_3 The way of learning I obtained from the course is more important than the course content itself.	237	2.19	1.018
Q022_4 I prefer working independently.	237	2.02	1.125
Q022_5 I think I was able to interact very often with teaching staff and students in the course.	236	2.31	1.077
Q022_6 As a student I needed to be more self-directed on this course compared with I'm used to in traditional course learning.	236	1.55	.751
Q022_7 Teaching staff are very competent and well prepared.	237	2.19	1.005
Q022_8 In this course the staff gave us detailed instructions on what to do and how to do it.	237	2.36	1.063
Q022_9 I feel the tutor is keeping track of what I am doing on the course.	236	2.79	1.121
Q022_10 I think I am left to get on with our work by myself.	236	2.83	1.184
Q022_11 I feel the tutor intervenes too much during the course.	236	4.03	.940
Q022_12 I feel the interaction with tutors has not been sufficient.	235	1.91	.968
Q022_13 The feedback on my work I received from the tutor was very helpful	236	2.29	1.089
Q022_14 I feel that I can ask questions and get a fast response on this course	237	2.32	1.028
Q022_15 The learning objectives in the course were very clearly stated.	237	2.14	.914
Q022_16 I found it was useful to interact with other students.	234	1.69	.765
Q022_17 What I learnt from the course helped me improve my working practice.	234	2.20	.915
Q022_18 The course has encouraged me to reflect on my learning.	232	2.09	.921
Q022_19 I found the discussion forum was not very helpful.	234	3.52	1.173
Q022_20 This way of learning increases my control of when and where I work.	234	1.88	1.595
Q022_21 I like being told clearly what to do next	234	2.19	1.138
Q022_22 I wish I had more control of what we had to learn and how to learn.	233	1.69	.754
Q022_23 The assessment strategy of the course helped me to learn better.	233	2.09	.934
Q022_24 The arrangement of the time for finishing the learning tasks is reasonable for me.	232	2.19	.912
Q022_25 The workload to fulfil the requirements of the syllabus was too heavy for me.	233	3.20	1.096
Q022_26 Even if I failed the exam, it will still have been useful attending this course.	233	2.47	1.283
Q022_27 The technology distracted me from the course content sometimes.	234	3.11	1.315
Q022_28 I needed more help on this course because of the technology.	234	2.76	1.223
Q022_29 I missed more face to face parts of a traditional course.	235	2.60	1.308
Q022_30 I think online learning was second best to traditional methods.	235	3.22	1.248
Q022_31I was excited by this way of learning.	235	2.00	.845
Q022_32 I found it is not difficult to balance time needed for the course with other things in my life.	234	1.98	.898
Q022_33 I think learning online required more time than I expected.	235	2.49	1.207
Q022_34 I think I'm able to study more effectively in the online environment.	235	2.06	.878
Q022_35 In an online learning environment, it is more difficult to know what I am expected to do.	234	2.59	1.101
Q022_36 Passing the exam is still my biggest concern of the study.	235	2.07	1.050
Q022_37 General speaking, the course content was interesting.	235	1.84	.811
Q022_38 I would like to take another course taught like this.	234	2.05	1.071
Q022_39 I feel I would be happier doing this course taught traditionally.	234	2.82	1.299
Valid N (listwise)	215		

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Strongly Disagree	Disagree

The response to Item Q022_22 is noteworthy (90.1% agreeing mean=1.69), expressing the students' wish to have more control over what to learn and how to learn. On the other hand, the majority of them (68.8%) also expected to be told clearly what to do and how to do it, as the result obtained from Q022_21 shows (mean=2.19). These two results seems somewhat contradictory since more self-control and learners' autonomy indicate more self-directedness in the learning process in which individual take the initiative in designing learning experiences, diagnosing needs, locating resources and evaluating learning. By contrast, individuals with less self-direction in their learning tend to want more structure and guidance from an instructor (see review in Chapter 3). This result, however, can be interpreted as these adult learners, as in this case, coming to the course with clearer self-concepts and motivations. They expressed their wish to be able to exert control over setting personal meaningful educational goals and the agenda for learning. However, they were also aware that to survive in the course, pass the exams and get the degree, it is extremely important to understand the course demand and find out what is required of them in their study. The way the course is delivered – online - made this finding out process more difficult. This explanation (see Chapter3) gains some empirical support from this study. A majority of students either strongly agree or agree with this as it is expressed in the statement in Item Q022_35 (mean=2.59). However, this is by no means suggesting that these students are less autonomous. The result in Q022_4 reinforced this result with 77.6% students showing their independence in accomplishing learning tasks.

Again, the result from Item Q022_36 (mean=2.07) showed that passing the exam was most students' priority in course study. Similarly, students showed some disagreement with the statement in Item Q022_26 (mean=2.47), which further shows the importance of passing the exam for them in the course study. The majority of students (87.7%) held positive opinions of the course content,

(Item Q022_37, mean=1.84), which was thought to have increased their interest in learning. The arrangement of time (Item Q022_24) and the workload (Item Q022_25) were perceived as reasonable. Over half of the students (59.8%) disagreed with the statement that the discussion forum was not helpful to their learning (mean=3.52). Students felt that the examination in the course helped them learn better (Item Q022_23, mean=2.09), providing evidence of the commonly recognized 'backwash' effect of examinations on learning.

One of the observations that can be made from the data for the group of items on communication and interaction with tutors is that students had strong aspirations towards more extensive interaction and communications with teachers. They showed their dissatisfaction in this aspect of their learning experience from Item Q022_12 (mean=1.91, 82.6% students either strongly agree or agree that there was not enough communication and interaction with teachers in this course). This result was reinforced by the data from Item Q022_11 (mean=4.03) showing that 78.8% students disagree that teachers had intervened too much in their study. The lukewarm positive responses gained from Item Q22_9 (mean=2.79) - "I feel the tutor is keeping track of what we are doing on the course" – reflects similar sentiments. Less than half of the students agreed with this statement whilst a certain proportion (28.4%) also disagrees. Students were largely positive about the timeliness of the responses they received to questions. Almost two thirds of responses (61.4%) agreed or agreed somewhat with the statement – "I feel that I can ask questions and get a fast response on this course". A similar proportion of students strongly agreed or agreed that the feedback given by teachers helped their learning. However, there were slightly more people unsure about this compared with the previous item.

Most students (79.9%) found a way to balance their study and work (Item

Q022_32. mean=1.98) although they were less sure that the time they needed to spend on course study was more than they expected (Item Q022_33, mean=2.49). There were strong positive feelings towards the flexibility of the course, which gave students more control over the time and location of their learning (Item Q022_20, mean=1.88).

Students largely (74.5%) expressed that they were excited by taking part in this kind of learning (Item Q022.31, mean=2). However, opinions varied considerably on the statement (Item Q022_30, mean=3.22) that an on-line course was second best to traditional methods with over one third (31.5%) strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement and over 45% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. A majority of students had expressed that they miss the face-to-face parts of a traditional course (strongly agree/agree >50%). There were over 40% of the students strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement that they would be happier doing this course in the traditional way (Item Q022_39). The proportion which disagrees with this was also significant (over 30%). A majority of students (74.8%) think they would like to take part in another similar on-line course in the future.

Figure 5.7 Most helpful component
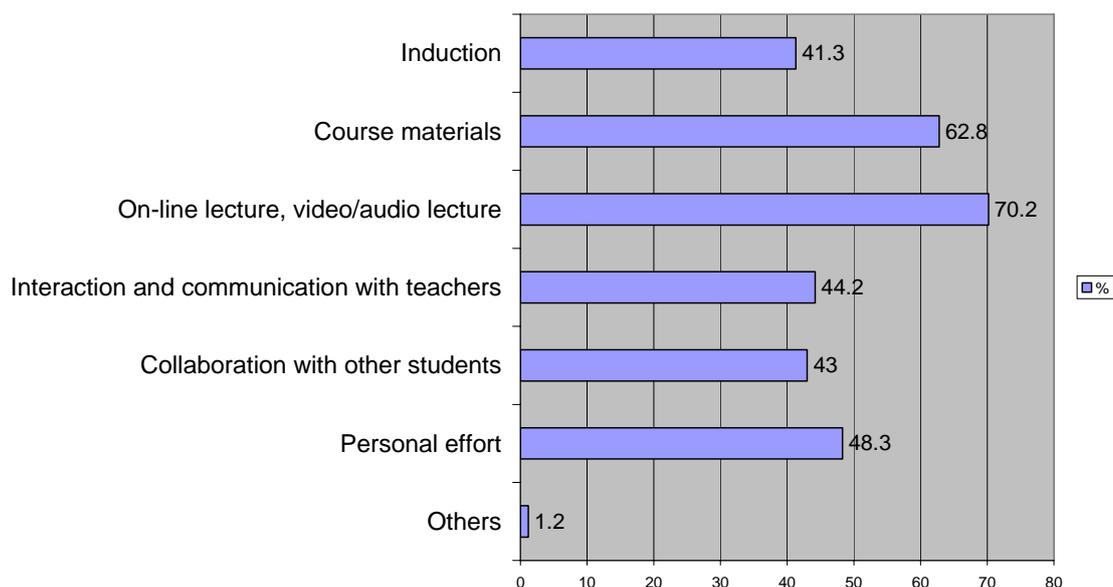
Figure 5.7 shows the results of the item addressing the components perceived as most helpful to their study.

Table 5.11 Difficulties experienced

Difficulties experienced	%
The place where I study is not quiet enough.	12
I have no personal computer.	9.9
The internet cost me too much when I use it for study at home.	12.4
There is no convenient printer to use.	29.8
The internet access is not reliable enough	27.3
Using on-line discussion forums	22.3
Handing assignment on-line	20.7
Playing the courseware/CD-Rom	26
Having difficulties of finding way around in course web	22.3
When there is technical problem nobody is around to help me.	40.9
No timely feedback of assignments from the tutors.	28.5
Not enough effective interaction with tutors.	62.4
Working demand took away too much of my time.	59.1
Feeling lonely, not enough interaction with other students.	26.9
Feeling isolated, not get enough care as much as other students in the university	30.2
The course content is too difficult to catch up	7.9
The way of assessing our study is not reasonable.	9.5

And finally, Table 5.11 gives the responses to Q.24, a multiple choice item for students to identify the difficulties they have experienced in the programme of study. Among these options, the most commonly experienced difficulties are listed as a lack of effective interaction with tutors and demands on time because of the workload, which were chosen by 62.4% and 59.1% of all the respondents

respectively. Many respondents (40.9%) also felt it to be difficult when there was a technical problem but nobody was around to help. Apart from these, the feeling of isolation and loneliness was also experienced to various extents by the respondents, for reasons such as lack of care from the tutors and insufficient interaction with peer students.

Overall, the quantitative data presented in this chapter provides a snapshot of learners' general experiences in the two programmes, such as their reactions to the course design and delivery, technology and communicative media used; teaching and assessment. This information thus forms a foundation for further exploration with qualitative data to answer all the research questions more fully.

Chapter 6

Qualitative Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents and analyses qualitative data gathered from face-to-face individual interviews with learners, tutors and course designers, telephone interviews with teaching assistants in the JN case; focus group interviews with learners in both cases, digital diaries from learners of the JN course, informal discussions and reports of WeSU plus open question answers from the questionnaire in both cases and the field notes from the observations. These qualitative data provide detailed and in-depth descriptions of learners' experiences in both cases, and thus address all the research questions. In reporting the data, any personal names that appear are pseudonyms, to maintain the anonymity of the respondents.

6.1 Personal beliefs, motivations, concerns and learning strategies and behaviours

6.1.1 Perceptions of e-learning and learning technologies

In agreement with the results from the questionnaire, flexibility in terms of time, learning place and pace was also generally reported from the interviews and open questions as the major advantage of e-learning. This was particularly welcomed by the learners from the JN case, who thought the course provided a great learning opportunity for people with a full-time job.

It's the most wonderful learning experience I've ever had – gaining knowledge without leaving your home!

(Open Question Entries – JN, 188)

Similarly, a female student felt this:

I'm really grateful that I can take an e-leaning course because for someone like me,

who has a full-time job, family, children, there is no way I can go back and study on

campus.

(Student Interview-JN, 7)

In China, entry to universities is difficult to attain, with as many as 2,000,000 students competing each year through entrance examinations for 500,000 university openings (Gu, 2006). The competition was even fiercer before the expansion of higher education in the mid-1990s. Along with other reasons, such as the disruption of higher education during the Cultural Revolution and family financial situations, many adult learners, like many in my study, have missed the opportunity to go to university. The aspiration toward higher education has driven many of them to take an online degree programme, such as this one provided by JN. Thus, most of the learners took part in the course for the sake of convenience that allowed them to combine their work with study, rather than being convinced by the benefit offered by the e-learning technology itself.

Meanwhile, there was no lack of people who had started seeing that the technologies employed in the course could be beneficial to their learning in certain ways after studying on the courses for some time:

We can have a chance to share the excellent teaching and learning resources

through the internet without traveling to the campus! This is great!

(Student focus group-WeSU,2)

It is actually better than I thought at the beginning. For example, it is really nice to

learn through the courseware. Unlike the one-off teaching in the classroom, it is

repeatable! You can choose the parts you're interested in or the parts you found

difficult to study, again and again!

<div align="right">

(Student Interview-JN, 7)

</div>

It was also believed that e-learning courses (internet) could provide abundant online learning resources which could help their learning. However, doubt about the effectiveness of learning in this way also had its place for a variety of reasons, such as technical problems, lack of sufficient interaction and communication with teachers and other students in e-learning courses, and not getting on-time feedback. Consequently, some learners perceived that the disadvantage of e-learning is the lack of depth in the knowledge gained. Interestingly, such perceptions and concerns were also found in course designers and tutors' interviews:

In the same subject, on-campus full-time students might be expected to achieve

more in terms of gaining in-depth knowledge and engaging with the theoretical ideas

compared to their counterparts from the part-time online course…(Why?)… Because

they are learning through the classroom teaching and have direct interactions with

their teachers and other students, also because they will be able to access more

learning materials from the library…

<div align="right">

(Tutor Interview, JN, 1)

</div>

These comments reflect a widespread perception of e-learning (or Distance Education more generally) in China, where it is regarded as being peripheral in status and a 'second best' in quality compared to traditional on-campus education (Gu, 2006). It can be argued that the re-assurance of the quality of e-learning will be a difficult task to achieve when tutors and course designers have limited understanding of the nature of this form of learning and any extra support it might need. In the JN case, it was evidenced that learners perceived

that the biggest problem of e-learning is that it replaced human contact with a machine, while no alternative effective way of communication was provided by the course. E-learning, in this case, was very much seen as 'self-study learning' by learners.

The nature of this e-learning course, for me, is just like 'Zi Kao[5]', it all depends on yourself. Of course, this is slightly better because you can get at least some help and guidance.

(Student Interview-JN, 10)

Such learners' experiences are not surprising when a course designer interviewed in the JN case indicated clearly that the course had been designed for learners to learn mainly by themselves and efforts had been mainly concentrated on creating course software and learning materials to make sure this process of 'self-study' went smoothly. On the other hand, it could be argued that with such a perception, learners in the JN case are more prepared to work on their own. By contrast, e-learning is reported as 'new' way of learning by participants in the WeSU case and there was a higher level of anxiety toward the learning ahead at the beginning of the programme, compared to the group in the JN case.

6.1.2 Intentions, motivations and reasons for coming to learn

Firstly and most significantly, it was evidenced that learners' motivation was closely linked with career relevance of the course in these two cases. A good preparation for a future career or making an improvement in their current career provides a strong stimulus to learning. In the WeSU case, the in-service teachers were expecting to learn something they could directly or indirectly

---

[5] 'Zi Kao' is a form of self-study in which people get their learning materials, study at their own pace and attend the centrally organized examination for the entrance to university in China.

transfer to classroom teaching.

I like those video clips, they are very rich in content and there are some good ideas I can learn to use in my own teaching in classroom.

(Student Focus groups-WeSU, 2)

Similarly, in the JN case, positive comments were made when students felt that the course was helping them develop work-related skills and knowledge and improve working efficiency or preparing them properly for further development in their career, whilst negative comments were made about those aspects of the course that were not doing so.

I want to learn something useful and practical. Some of the course content is too 'theoretical' and some subjects are far away from our daily life and work, which has also been taking too much of our time. I wish the course could provide more case studies, use the real cases to explain the theories, which should really help us develop our problem-solving skills!

(Student Interview-JN, 4)

Similar comments appeared many times across the interviews. There was also dissatisfaction with the superficial teaching of some more 'useful' units. A hunger for greater knowledge, in particularly career-relevant subjects, was reported:

We have been working for all these years and are not fresh graduates any more. We have some in-depth practical knowledge in the field. Therefore, I want to become an 'expert' in this specific area, not knowing a bit of everything in general...

(Student Focus Group-JN)

Some of the units are very theoretical. Since it's not likely I'm going to use them a lot in my job, it's ok for me as long as I can pass the exam. But for those units, such as International Trade, are really relevant to my job, I wish I could gain more in-depth knowledge on it.

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

It is clear that these students had formed opinions about learning needs based on their experiences. The career relevance of the courses seemed to stimulate the learners' interest and motivate them work harder and a strong message delivered in both cases is that much emphasis has been put on the application of knowledge to practice in the real world. At the same time, the aspirations for career relevance and enhancement are closely related to concerns over the credibility of the qualification. The qualification offered, that could help with their current or future job, was the important attraction for most of the people enrolled in the JN case. Eight out of thirteen interviewees admitted the importance of the qualification the course offered, echoing 86.4% of responses from the questionnaire on the same issue. Similarly, many participants in the WeSU case also expressed their particular interest in obtaining a formal qualification, despite one not being offered. The current fierce competition in the labour market in China along with the rapid socio-economical development produces higher and higher demand for high-skilled labour; and skill levels are measured mainly by qualifications. As this student said:

Qualification is just about as important as your life in China!

(Open Question Entries – JN, 136)

Similarly, another interviewee had this to say:

Yes, I must admit qualification is very important to me, in considering the situation in

the Chinese labour market nowadays. I am interested in the subject as well, but it's

not realistic for me to say I came to the course just for learning the subject for its own

sake.

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

However, seeing these motivations as purely 'extrinsic' and in a negative light might be inappropriate, even though the qualification is a reward external to the course itself. Ten out of thirteen interviewees in the JN case expressed their strong interest in the subjects they chose and expected the course materials to be interesting. Findings in the questionnaire were consistent with this, where more than half the respondents expressed their interest in the subject. Although there was a clear recognition of the importance of examinations and academic success for career enhancement, this was also very often accompanied by learning-related goals:

I'm really interested in this subject (Law). I had a degree in Economics, and studied

Law as one of the optional subjects. I found it's fascinating, so I decided to come to

learn it in this online course. Of course the qualification is vital if I want to develop a

career in this area…

(Student Interview-JN, 5)

The strong interest in learning the course material and the application of the knowledge learnt implies an 'intrinsic' element in motivation. As this student continued to say:

…There are so many changes in many aspects of the laws in China in these years,

however, some examples given in the textbooks are really out-of-date. I wish the

course could have done it a bit better on this aspect and created opportunities for us

to see the applications of laws learnt in society during the course study.

(Student Interview-JN, 5)

The aspiration for the application of knowledge would be highly valued in Confucian philosophy of education: one's own learning is encouraged to become a part of the well-being of society at large through the binding of individuals' pursuit of knowledge and self-perfection to a higher moral and social obligation. Moreover, the priority of the qualification is completely understandable when considering the tuition fees learners have to pay, which is quite a large amount of money for an ordinary Chinese family. Many people perceived the tuition fee charged by the course to be high.

Of course it would be better to really learn something, but when I found the course content is not really that interesting and particularly useful, the most important thing for me at the moment is to get the degree. I paid the fee and have boarded the boat, you know, I can't get off anytime I want. I need to get there (get the degree). *So quite honestly my baseline is to pass the exams.*

(Student Interview, JN – 2)

It is clear that the student was somewhat demotivated by the course design when he thought the course was not that 'interesting' or 'useful'. However, as a result of considering the cost, time and effort, the student seemed to be left with little choice but to go through with the course, despite the disappointment with the course content. In the WeSU case, there is no formal, credible qualification provided. The participation could be seen as more 'intrinsically motivated' as learners volunteered to participate the programme. However, it was not without its problems, as an e-tutor reflects:

This is obviously a problem when learners who are 'volunteers', whose participation is not necessarily acknowledged by their peers or employers, there is no tangible reward, and limited contact with the organisers of the trial.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, III)

Thus, it is not surprising that the learners in this case found it difficult to prioritise the study among other tasks in their busy working schedule, as many reported in the focus groups. The worse situation was brought by small number of learners who were required to attend the programme by the school authority. One of them showed strong antipathy towards the programme in the focus group interviews. She perceived the programme as a distraction from her teaching. This could have caused problems for her to take real responsibility for her learning.

The combined motivation of interest in subject knowledge, developing work related skills and knowledge and gaining a qualification to help with one's career was not uncommon in both cases. Motivation did not seem to hinge upon a contrast between the extrinsic and intrinsic but more as a co-existence of the two, as some authors have found in Chinese traditional classroom settings. Echoing findings from the questionnaire, learning also has significant personal meanings for many learners as they see it as a trajectory for lifelong personal development. This includes enhancing knowledge, developing all-round skills and making life more meaningful. All these inspired participants to learn and become a 'better' person:

I'm eager to gain knowledge, obtain the higher qualification, get a better job, improve my living standard and develop myself as a person!

(Open questions-JN, 135)

I think the best thing I've ever done is to keep on learning and 'upgrading' myself after I left the school…Learning for me is not just gaining the knowledge, but the way of thinking and doing things. I believe learning is always useful, maybe now, maybe in the future sometimes, maybe shown in different ways.

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

Therefore, learning is a lifelong striving for any human being to become the most genuine, sincere, and human person he or she can be. It is an inseparable part of life. Apart from this, the collective nature of the achievement motivation of Chinese learners discussed in Chapter 2 was also evidenced in learners' experiences in the study. A male student recorded this in his diary:

I went back to see my parents today. They are still living in the countryside. Every time when I see them, I always feel so sorry for them because I couldn't offer them a better life after they have brought me up…I wish I could get the degree quickly and find a better job to help with my family.   *(Student Diary – JN, 7)*

The finding is echoed by Salili's (1996) argument as reviewed in Chapter 2, that the collectivist culture exerts considerable influence on students' achievement motivation, where they see that success and failure are not just a personal matter but as allowing or preventing 'repayment' to the family and even to the society as a whole to some extent. The responsibility to family was revealed as becoming a driving force to learn for many learners in the cases. Another interesting quote was from a female interviewee:

One of the reasons for me to come to the course is to set myself as an example to my daughter, of how important it is to carrying on learning!

(Student Interview – JN, 10)

In sum, the evidence has shown that although the reasons for participation in and motivation for learning varied to a great extent for different individuals, the belief in the importance attached to education rooted in Chinese traditional ideology showed its impact. At the same time, it is no doubt that learners' motivations lie beyond a consideration of the learner as an individual and are located in the wider socio-cultural context.

Moreover, it was found that learners' motivation and commitment to learn are not fixed but open to change, along with the learning process. The evidence was shown clearly in a few learners' digital diaries, such as this one:

3-20 Today I registered myself on the [Online discussion] *forum of the School* [SoDE] *as the start of my new course. Although I have used similar things in some other websites, I think I'll choose the SoDE one as my main choice from now on. I'm also thinking of getting a new laptop so that I'll be prepared myself better for the study in this programme.*

4-20 In order to stick to my plan, I have set up the SoDE as the main page in my laptop. I did an online test today, but only got 60%. I left a message in the forum afterwards. Wish I could talk to someone about it. I'm feeling a bit like a little penguin in the South Pole…

5-04 I finally got some time away from the work these couple of days because of the holiday and have been thinking of catching up with the study. But my laptop suddenly got some problems! I can't download the online lectures I missed before and I can't make contact with other classmates from online either! How frustrating!

5-27 I am really disappointed by the XXX unit taught in this term. I was really looking forward to it at the beginning because it covers some interesting topics in my subject. But the lecturer was literally reading the book to us during the online lecturing without giving any examples relevant to our life. Moreover, there is no textbook or handout given out. So I don't think I gained anything from it at all! I have to download some materials from the internet to help myself to learn.

6-11 Getting very busy recently because I just moved to a new department in my job.

The exam is also coming next month. I think my baseline is to make sure I pass the exam.

<div align="right">*(Students Diary – JN, 5)*</div>

The diary entries have given some details of learners' thoughts and activities as they were happening. Those quoted above show this learner's motivation and commitment to learn did change while the course going on. Some of the factors that caused such change can be identified, such as poor quality of teaching, technical problems, lack of interaction with teachers and peer students and career relevance of the course material. These changes that can be traced also reinforce our understanding of the nature of learning as a dynamic process where learners grow and both transform and are transformed by their life experiences, as identified in Confucian philosophy and John Dewey.

Finally, it is interesting to note that there are several learners in the JN case who showed strong aspirations to come to the university to make friends, to use the university facilities and enjoy a university life. One student, for example, mentioned in his diary that in order to use the facilities in the university more fully while he was studying on this course, he rented a place to stay just nearby the campus. This might be seen as unusual in an online course. However, in China, a campus education means many things in one basket: direct access to teachers, learning facilitaties, health and recreation facilities and peers and friends (Gu, 2006). E-learners' expectation to e-learning probably has been influenced by this perception.

6.1.3 Learning strategies and behaviours

Time was reported as a critical issue in these adult e-learners' learning in these two programmes. The tension between study and other commitments in demands on their time generally exists for most of these learners in both cases. In the WeSU case, the six-week pilot was felt to be 'too short' and they were

'always under the pressure to rush to finish' (Students Focus Group, WeSU-3). The pressure of time was deepened where the learning materials could only be accessed online in order to complete the learning tasks. Learners' felt that there was not enough time allowed them to understand, think and reflect before they were asked to join the online discussion and write the reflective journals. The pilot study was conducted during the school term-time, when learners had to cope with heavy workloads in the school, which added to the pressure for learners to manage their time in studying.

In the JN case, the tension between work and study was also very commonly reported. The more effective learners were found to be very good at making use of their sparse time. The multiple forms of the learning materials enabled them to learn in many contexts and situations, such as listening to the lecture audio recording in the subway on the way to work or doing some reading in the gaps between work. Students' audio diaries have given some details of how this was dealt with by different individual learners:

3-21 I caught a very bad cold today. When I was having drops in the hospital, I finished reading two articles in Business English. Because I'm going to Shanghai tomorrow for the business, I have to get them done before then.

(Students Diary – JN, 1)

4-12 It's 8:15 in the morning here and I'm on my way to the office. You might think I have just got out from the bed and now rush to work. Then you're wrong! I got up at 6:30am and left home at 7:00am. I sent my child to his school, that's about 7:30am. I start work at 8:30am. You know what I do in this gap of the time? I read! Textbooks, handouts, other reference books…. That's how I manage time – use all the sparse time I have!

(Students Diary – JN, 3)

It was also believed that, although time is a big issue for everyone, the key to dealing with it is one's willingness to learn. As this interviewee expressed it:

Time is like the water in the sponge, you need to squeeze the sponge in order to get the water out and the harder you press the more you can get.

(Student Interview-JN, 3)

This could be seen as reflecting the ideology in Confucian philosophy of education that effort is seen as the key to success. Thus, will power, self-reliance, and self-discipline have been given great emphasis. Similarly, it was seen as an important and useful learning strategy to make a plan at the beginning of the course and stick to it. Many interviewees have reported that by doing so they were able to do well in the programme learning.

In dealing with difficult learning tasks, a high level of learner independence was also evidenced, particularly in the JN case. It was not uncommon for learners to find different ways to organize their learning and complete learning tasks, with minimal guidance given by the tutors. A female student's diary (Students Diary – JN, 1) recorded how she learned the material for a new unit. When the textbook was felt to be "too general" to follow, she searched for extra relevant information and articles from the internet to help her learn. When the online self-assessment was found to be difficult, she downloaded the tasks and printed them out, then practiced and reflected on them over and over again. Towards the end of the semester, she expressed her feeling that she has become fairly confident about what she had learnt.

6.2 Experiences of the e-Pedagogy

6.2.1 Learning models underpinning the course design

- *WeSU Case*

In the module on Educational Technology, the developers worked towards a joint design of the programme, which included beliefs and values from China and the UK.

The pedagogic approach that was negotiated was based on a combination of cooperative and self-managed learning using experiential techniques, and taking into account the local infrastructure in China of local study centres and the number of learners in a typical learning group…The final result was a blend of the more 'open' pedagogic designs we use in our own practice in the UK and the more structured approach used in China.

(UK eTutor Report – WeSU, III)

When there were differences of opinion between British and Chinese developers, the Chinese developers tended to feel that the management team was in favour of the British developers' opinions when making decisions.

UK developers' design was based on a problem-solving style of learning, which was good, but I don't agree with using this for all of the courses. We think training students for in-depth thinking is important. The course designers were always in favour of the UK group's model of a single format for learning. Can we have two kinds of styles existing at the same time when seeking the balance of different concepts and theories in course design? Content decides the format.

(Chinese developer focus group report – WeSU)

Such opinion raised the Chinese developers' concern over the effectiveness of

the 'single model' introduced by UK team works in a Chinese context. Nevertheless, there is a quite explicit learning model – Social Constructivism - underpinning the course design, as indicated in this UK e-tutors' report:

…our materials put great emphasis on interaction, communication and the development of a learning community that negotiates, engages in discourse and completes course activities and assignments to build a shared community of practice. The e-tutors function as facilitators, inspirators and validators and the technology serves as a communicative and collaborative infrastructure.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, III)

Learning activities inspired by this pedagogical design were offered via the Internet. The Learners are expected to learn to collaborate through discussion and reflection via online forums provided by the course.

- JN case

In contrast to the WeSU case, the learning model is more implicit in the JN case. There is no pedagogical theory specified anywhere in the course documents and none was mentioned in interviews and informal conversations held with course designers or teachers. The course is designed for learners to learn from the materials (textbook, courseware etc) individually with the aid of online lectures, video/audio-lectures and online discussion forums (Course Designer Interview – JN, 1). There are normally three online lectures in each subject every semester. At the introductory session, the intended learning outcomes will be specified; some important content will be highlighted. At the session given in the middle of the semester, feedback on the students' assignments is collected and some questions raised by students are discussed. And the final session is designed to help students to prepare for the final exam of the subject. The online lecturing lasts two hours and the final 10-15 minutes at the end of the

lecture is for students to ask questions. In practice, students are not encouraged to ask any question due to the large number of students in the online lecture. Therefore, there is hardly any interaction between teacher and students during the lecture. Rather, it is more like simply teachers presenting the subject content (Field Notes – JN, 4). One interviewee expressed it by saying:

The online lecture is more like 'being presented' rather than 'being heuristic'

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

There are two discussion forums used in the course website, a school forum for general questions plus a subject forum for specific questions on subject learning. However, it is evident from the observations of the forum postings and interviews with the students that they were mainly used for exchanging information, sharing resources, making contact and asking questions about technical issues, course administrative matters or subject study and examinations. It was generally perceived as being *"short on in-depth thoughtful discussions going on about the course materials" (Student Interview-JN, 10).*

Therefore, the way the course is structured and delivered does suggest that most components of the design have adopted the traditional didactic model. Traditional classroom materials were transferred to online or other digital form. The online discussion forum was mainly built for exchanging information, resolving problems and answering questions that the students raised.

6.2.2 Learners' responses to these learning models

What did students have to say about their learning experiences in these two online learning programmes based on these two different pedagogies? Did collaborative learning occur in the intended constructivist learning model in the

WeSU case? Was there hardly any real learning in the traditional 'teaching-by-telling' model in JN?

- WeSU case

In this case, it was found that the learners experienced great challenges and difficulties with the online collaborative approaches promoted by the modules. In the focus groups held with participants, they expressed a fairly high level of anxiety about the entire process. The first and foremost cause of this anxiety was a lack of understanding of what was actually required in terms of their input. It was thought that the overall objectives of the course, the demands of the learning tasks, and the assessment method were never made explicit enough to them, which caused them confusion in their study.

We felt the learning objective was so unclear in the module we took. Even after studying for a while and some discussions between us, we have no idea what they expect us to do! We all spent quite a lot of time looking but couldn't find any; we are really feeling lost!

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 2)

Sometimes I logged in to the course website, but didn't know what to do, so I logged out again. Since we really haven't got much spare time after the whole day's work, it is impossible to spend too much time to find out what to do instead of actually doing it.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 1)

The confusion seemed also to exist towards the function of the various resources in the VLE .

We felt blind of discussion - what to say, how to say it. If tutors can set up of a set of

specific topics and we talk around it, it might make discussion more purposeful and productive.

<div align="right">

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 2)

</div>

Despite having had a minimum of half a day's training on VLE (sometimes, it was a full day if it could be arranged), a number of participants clearly experienced some problems with using it.

I tried to post my question or respond to others in the forum, but it's very frustrating because I'm not sure how it works. Does it only allow commenting on a thread once or you have to comment at least a couple of times?

<div align="right">

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

</div>

The confusion over how the forum works was also evidenced when the interviewee said:

I can't get internet access at work easily but when I get home at 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening, there is already nobody there!

<div align="right">

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 1)

</div>

This shows that this student was expecting the discussion forum to function as a synchronous communicative tool where she could find someone there to 'talk to'. Indeed, time lag in the forum was thought unfavourable by these learners. The period of waiting for the reply could cause interest in the question to be lost.

Normally you won't get any reply till a couple of days later. By the time this question might have been replaced by other new ones and even yourself you have already lost interest in it.

<div align="right">

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

</div>

In each unit, there was at least one forum activity, and sometimes two or even more. When all discussions were open at any one given time, it could easily have led to some confusion amongst the participants in terms of the beginning and the end of any specific thread. It also made the 'finding back' of a specific thread become a very time-consuming task. Not surprisingly, the e-tutor has found that 'participants were unwittingly initiating completely new discussions instead of contributing to the one they thought they were contributing to' *(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, 2)*. For these in-service teachers with heavy workloads while studying in the pilot programme, on-time feedback and synchronous communication seemed much more desirable. There was a chatting facility provided by the course. However, in the focus group interviews, some participants declared that they were uncertain how to access it and some of them were even not aware of its existence at all. Those who had used it were rather disappointed with it:

The chatting room is almost no use at all since there is hardly anyone there at the same time because we've all got very busy and different schedules and there is only a small number of teachers in the same module.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,3)

When people try to use the chatting facility in Moodle, although there was a list of logged-on users in Moodle, it did not allow users to click on names of other users who are logged on directly via this list. The learners' experience of this facility was similar to those of e-tutors:

I entered chat several times, not only to 'speak to' participants, but also to other tutors whom I could see were logged on. I also sent emails to suggest participants kept a chat window open. However, no-one ever entered the chat at the same time as me. The logs did not show that participants had ever entered the chat. I am unsure

whether this is because they never did actually enter the chat, or if the log does not register chat activity.

<div align="right">(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)</div>

These problems, plus unfamiliarity with using the forum, made it difficult to learn effectively from online discussion. Therefore, it is not surprising that the e-tutor noticed:

The level of discussion on the forums was somewhat disappointing…the postings to the forums are largely individual and one-off postings - there are relatively few occasions whereby participants engage in any deliberation.

<div align="right">(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, I)</div>

It was also felt by some participants that some contributions in VLE were too superficial, without much thought behind them. They were of the opinion that such contributions did not add to their own understanding or encourage them to respond. For UK course designers and eTutors, the disappointing responses to the course design were taken to be due to Chinese learners' inability to adapt their approaches to learning to suit a virtual learning environment based on a constructivist design.

This may possibly be partly attributed to the traditional ways of Chinese pedagogic approaches which are typically teacher-driven and teacher-centred. Thus, with the benefit of hindsight, we were possibly expecting too much of our Chinese learners to make this huge pedagogic leap in order to work beneficially through the e-learning material.

<div align="right">(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, I).</div>

However, participants' understanding of the learning design and approach

towards the end of the course sheds some light to another version of the story:

I see this way of learning is different from what we used to. Although it's about theories, but you're not asked to memorize or recite them, but through reading, then communicate with others, reach understanding through this process. Other people's different opinions might inspire you as well. I think it's a good way of learning.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 2)

Something I like about the forum is you can voice your own opinions here and be seen by others. At the same time, you can share others' points and information. It's like learning from communication and learning from reflection not reciting the materials.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 2)

This way of learning (VLE) is very relaxing and natural for communication. There is no teacher authority pressing on you which sometimes inhibits your thinking actively.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 3)

The course has actually created a platform for us to learn from communication and reflection, learn from each other!

(Student Focus Group-WeSU, 3)

It is worth noting that the most valuable use of VLE seems to emerge from the discussions related to their teaching practice in the classroom. This is reported mostly among the participants themselves. As this e-tutor has noticed:

Some of the most satisfying discussions we had revolved around sharing our classroom experiences. Firstly, exchanges of this kind facilitate a more personal relationship between tutor and participant, and between participants themselves. Secondly, in terms of teachers sharing ideas to improve classroom practice, it is a

sound way of offering suggestions, of 'trouble-shooting' and of reinforcing a collaborative climate.

<div align="right">

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)

</div>

More significantly, the face-to-face discussions and collaborations among the participants themselves were evidently very intensive. This kind of discussion and collaboration included sharing understanding of the learning materials, searching for information from the Internet and completing the learning tasks. Unfortunately, the number of participants taking the same module was small. This, plus the poorly functioning communicative tools provided by the course, made it difficult for participants to know and communicate with those from other schools, which was desired by many at the beginning of the programme.

The online journal was highlighted as another major learning task inspired by the pedagogical design of the course to encourage learners 'to be reflective' and 'to be critical'. However, it seems not to have been very successfully conducted, as this e-tutor wrote in her report:

…reflective writing never really got underway (quite apart from the fact that the participants had not previously done any reflective writing) and the journal became a kind of online descriptive 'exercise book'.

<div align="right">

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)

</div>

Instead of writing critically or reflectively, the participants were *"copying and pasting from my own materials, sometimes transcripts of the video interviews… (UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)*

The participants appeared not to have understood the function of the journal. They raised questions like: What is it for? What's the difference between this

and making reading notes? How is it going to be assessed? What will be considered as a good journal? Unfortunately, there seemed to be no guidance of this kind embedded in the VLE.

I think this part of the learning activities (online journal) is not of any use at all- just copy and paste something on it from the material that you think is important.

(Student Focus Group, 2)

There was some overlap of function on the VLE, and in some of the instructions, such as in Unit 1, between 'reflective writing' and 'making notes'. This was confusing for the participants as some e-tutors realized afterwards. Because the journal was accessible to the tutor, it was not only a *"private workplace where participants would be able to note their reflections, refer to them as they undertook activities and tasks, and access them as a personal record of learning throughout the unit"* (*UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II*), as designers and e-tutors understood. Participants from the focus groups expressed their expectations of getting more detailed feedback from tutors on their input to the journal, which was thought would be helpful to further improvement.

In terms of learners' input to the reflective journals, the designers/e-tutors ascribed the unsatisfactory result to learners' lack of familiarity with the notion of reflection:

…participants had not grasped sufficiently the notion of reflective practice and so were unable to effectively undertake some of the online tasks and activities or apply these methodologies to their own learning and classroom practice.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)

Meanwhile, it was also recognized this might be due to the lack of support for reflective practice:

Whilst reflective practice provided the theoretical framework of both T&L1 & 2 the materials did not include input on how to write reflectively, the purpose of reflective journals, how to apply reflective practice in the classroom context, and so on.   It has become clear that solely theoretical input on our part is insufficient. This was demonstrated by the extremely superficial level of reflection evident in participant responses.

(*UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II*)

However, in the focus group interviews with the learners, it seemed there was no lack of more in-depth understanding of the nature of 'reflection'.

I found this reflective style of teaching and learning is very new and very practical. It is not asking you to learn only in a theoretical way but getting close to your classroom practice. For example, the content of video clips is very rich, although it didn't tell you how exactly to do it because there is huge difference in terms of the context, you can always find a way to relate them to the children you are teaching, think through it, compare them, and learn something from it to improve your practice!

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

Reflection is not like making notes which ends up with cutting and pasting information. It takes time to think.

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

I read something, reflect on it. It can always give me some good thoughts on my practice.   *(Student Focus Group-WeSU,3)*

One of the participants even suggested that:

I am wondering if it is possible to conduct these reflective activities with the students I'm teaching? To show them those videos of case studies and then talk with them together?

<div align="right">

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

</div>

According to these comments, it is not fair to say the learners "*had not grasped sufficiently the notion of reflective practice"* as the e-tutor suspected. It is more likely they had not understood the way of 'being reflective' that the course demanded, such as making entries in the online journal, rather than of the notion of reflection itself. Thus it appears that the tutors and course designers were 'blaming' the students, accusing them of being deficient in some respect, whereas the students themselves saw the problem as lying in the design of the course materials and structure, particularly in relation to the inadequate induction into the new practices that were expected of them.

- JN case

It was evident that many students felt the online sessions are far too general to help them cope with any specific learning difficulties they encountered during the learning process. More importantly, due to the very limited interaction between teacher and students in these online lectures, they left the students' desire to interact with teachers unfulfilled. An interviewee expressed this by saying:

If there are 40 students attending in the lecture either online or in the classroom, which is normally more than that, 10 minutes for asking question, then everyone will only have 25 seconds. What do you think you can do in such a short time?

<div align="right">

(Student Interview-JN, 3)

</div>

For those who could not attend the lecture when it was given, it was possible to download the lecture video from the internet and watch it some other time at their convenience. However, it was reported that the quality of the downloaded video-lectures was not always satisfactory. In addition to these online lectures, there are also audio-lectures or video-lectures recorded beforehand and put into the subject courseware as part of learning materials delivered to students. Some well-designed courseware was highly praised by students and was deemed to have helped with their learning to a great extent. However, some of the video/audio lectures were thought to be "*…so boring. Teaching there is just like reading the textbook!" (Student Focus Group-JN).*

You can easily fall asleep by listening to that kind of lecture record, you know, particularly after a whole day's work! I suggest some of the lecturers should ask their friends or other colleagues to listen to it and give some comments after they have recorded it.

(Student Interview-JN, 6)

It is not surprising that these pre-recorded lectures cannot cater for the individual students learning needs. However, it is worth noting that it was not only students who perceived the problems with this form of teaching. A lecturer interviewed had this to say in terms of recording the video/audio lectures:

I found it's very depressing. You know teaching should be a two-way process. When you have no audience, there is no dialogue, no exchanging ideas and no feedback. It is really difficult to keep yourself full of enthusiasm all the way along, sometimes you just want to finish it as soon as possible.

(Tutor Interview-JN, 3)

Nevertheless, online lectures were still considered as one of the most helpful

components in the course for their learning for many learners, as indicated in the student questionnaire. They were thought important in terms of giving a sharp focus on what to learn, clear aims and learning objectives for surviving in the course, and a certain level of feedback on students' learning. More importantly, these online lecturers seemed to have provided the only chances to 'see' the tutors and interact with them directly. A student felt this by saying:

The online lectures are good because I want to see my teacher - a real one, same as the ones in daily life!

(Open Question Entries – JN, 36)

Some students from JN might have the advantage of being able to talk to the tutors after the lecturer if they come to sit in the classroom where the lecture is held. In an online lecture observed, there were around 20 students who came to sit in the classroom. However, for some reason, there was a sudden change in the venue of the lecture. Because of the need for video-recording facilities, the lecturer had to sit separately from the students in another classroom so that the lecture could be videoed and uploaded online to reach learners across the country. Those who had come to the classroom felt very disappointed because they were hoping to meet the lecturer in person. After a while, many of them started leaving and twenty minutes later, there were only five students left. Among those who stayed, most were chatting to each other rather than listening to the lecture because the sound quality was poor in the classroom (Field Note – JN, 1).

One explained this as:

This is awful! We rushed to get here after a whole day's work just wanting to meet the lecturer and possibly have some direct interaction with him. Then we are arranged to

sit in a classroom with no teacher but watching the screen and not being able to hear clearly. There was even no computer that we can log into! Better to go home I think.

<div align="right">*(Field Notes – JN, 1)*</div>

Later the programme director explained that this was an emergency situation where it was suddenly found that there was a clash in classroom booking (Field Notes – JN, 3). In another observation of online lecturing, a female student was seen coming with prepared questions and made use of the opportunities for 'meeting the teacher' to raise her questions, face-to-face. She stated that this was the way that her questions could be resolved properly and efficiently. Many students expressed their wish to have more time to talk to the teacher after the lecture, but it is not always possible (Field Notes – JN, 4).

For others, the online lectures seemed to have provided a sense of continuity with their previous learning experience of whole class teaching.

It has made me feel like being back to the time in school, many of us attending in the same class to listen to the same teacher, although it's online this time. And it's nice, I like it.

<div align="right">*(Open Question Entries – 176)*</div>

Many of these adult learners missed the opportunity to go to university for different reasons, as mentioned earlier. The feeling of going 'back to the university' seemed particularly attractive for them. Emails and discussion forums were also used to help students make contact with teachers in the course. However, communications through e-mails or a discussion forum were not seen to be as effective as face-to-face or synchronous communication for most of the learners. Only two of the thirteen interviewees visited the forum regularly whilst all the others said they very rarely used it. Reasons given for

this include these:

> *Yes, I don't go there very often, if I do [it is] just to see if there's any announcement from the school. I found it's not very active there. Since there are not many postings from other people, I feel there is not much point for me doing so as well.*
>
> (Student Interview-JN, 12)

> *I didn't find the forum very helpful. I think it's not a very effective communicative means anyway because it's not synchronous. Your problem cannot get solved immediately. You tend to forget it later when you are back to the busy work.*
>
> (Student Interview-JN, 9)

> *It is much more difficult to express yourself on this than in face-to-face, and similarly to understand others. It is not as easy as in face-to-face conversation in terms of clarifying your point when there is confusion.*
>
> (Student Interview-JN, 5)

The two interviewees who held slightly more positive views of the online forums considered it was useful in terms of gaining information and solving some technical problems. However, they also agreed that there were not many thoughtful discussions about the course content itself. In the interviews and open question entries of the online questionnaire, many participants expressed their wishes to combine some synchronous communicative function in the discussion forum. For instance, to set up a specific time regularly to invite tutors to join the discussion and interact with them directly.

6.2.3 Assessment

How their learning should be assessed is the foremost concern for the majority of students. In JN case, there were fairly mixed views towards the assessment

methods adopted in the course. Overall, the summative assessment was seen as not being any different from that in traditional courses: students were asked to finish the exam paper within a certain time in the classroom. For some, this was not appropriate because the aim of the study should not be 'to recall some information in the textbook" and the assessment should be more flexible in order to test the learner's ability to apply the new knowledge to practice. For others, the form of assessment was accepted as a means to help them organize their learning. The good examination results could provide 'a sense of achievement' in their learning. This was mentioned by several interviewees as part of the joy of learning on the course – getting a good result in the exams after their hard work. It is interesting to note that a student mentioned in his diary how he set up a competition between himself and his son to see who could get better results in their respective exams, as a way to encourage himself and his son. In addition, the scholarship he might get if he could do well in the exams acted as an incentive for his learning:

7-20 The money itself is not the main point for me. But if I got it, I would like to give part of it to my wife, because she has been supporting me so much in my study; the other part I would like to use to invite some other students in my class to have a dinner together somewhere because we have been helping each other all the way along.

(Student Diary-JN, 3)

Objective question type of e-assessment is also employed in each unit. Many learners acknowledge its role in recalling basic knowledge and comprehension. However, the reports of these e-assessments are more positive than negative. The immediate feedback given by computers while completing these e-assessments was thought to help their learning and understanding of the key concepts that has learnt. There were a few units in some subjects in the JN

case that adopted more innovative ways to assess students' learning apart from paper exams, such as web-page design in the Unit 'Digital Technology'. Students found them more challenging and interesting than paper exams because they could 'learn something from doing and practicing' (Student Diary, - JN, 2).

6-15 I found this when I was trying to finish the task [designing a web-page]: there are so many things you thought you already knew, but you can only find out the truth is that you did not till you actually do it…That's why I found this form of assessment is hard work, but very rewarding!

(Student Diary, - JN, 2)

Apart from the final exam, two or three assignments need to be completed in each unit, which counts as 20% of each learner's final grade. These assignments were generally regarded as a good way to help learners' learning and the deadline for completing these assignments was seen as helping to keep their learning on track. However, the rigid enforcement of the assignment deadline also aroused some complaints as being difficult to manage. This interviewee's comments reflect a very general view regarding this point across different interviews:

You know some people's job involves lots of travelling. So it's difficult for them to get access to the internet and hand in assignments on time if they are travelling. Very often because of this they miss the deadline and there is no way they can re-submit it. I think the school [SoDE] did not consider this and this is not good.

(Student Interview – JN, 3)

This issue was reflected in an argument between a Class Teacher, Ms Liu, who is in charge of the students from one of the study centres and Ms. Wang, the

programme director from the SoDE. Ms Liu sees herself as a link between the school and students. She has had extensive contact with students and is thus in a good position to understand their needs and difficulties.

My biggest concern is sometimes students needs cannot be met by the school…Some regulations are too rigid and inflexible, such as the assignment deadline. Once students missed it they can't do anything about it. Students very often come to me to say how difficult it is for them and I deeply sympathize with them. I spoke to the director but she refused to take my opinion and said it's the rule. I can't understand why the rules in the school cannot be adjusted to better meet learners' needs? ...Online courses should be flexible enough for students to have enough choice.

(Field Notes – JN, 2)

The programme director, Ms Wang responded to this by saying:

There are some people arguing that we need more 'humanised' management…Yes I agree that we should put students' needs as the first consideration but once rules and regulations are launched, we should stick to them. Even if there is a need for change, we should follow certain procedures not simply give promises to students.

(Informal Discussions – JN, 3)

The argument reflects a problem underlying the programme administration. For many e-learning institutions, it is a new experience to deliver an e-learning programme. There is no standard path or model of 'good practice' of management that they can follow. Rather, the way of managing the programme is very much copied from those used in traditional classroom teaching programmes. This problem certainly has negative impacts on learners' learning, as reported in the student interviews.

By contrast, the mode of assessment was not made clear at the very beginning and properly communicated with the participants in the WeSU case. This caused a high level of anxiety and confusion, as many of the participants expressed in the focus group interviews.

I think this issue [how learning should be assessed] should be addressed from day one. In the induction, learners should be told what assessment method this programme will adopt. I think that will help us learn with a clearer purpose, know what we are doing and why we do so. But now, we can only guess; there's material, then we read it; there's note making exercise, then we write a bit; there's discussion forum, then we go to have a look what others have said, then give a reply. Is that all what we are expected to do?

(Student Focus Group-WeSU,2)

This problem was also perceived by course designers from the UK:

It is well-known that assessment is a vital factor in motivation. We noted that the learners sought summative feedback on their progress in the trial and looked in part to the technology to give this.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, III)

The confusion over the assessment method, plus the use of an online discussion forum in the programme, have been the main sources of anxiety over learning for learners in this case. This has had negative effects on their learning experience as a whole.

6.3 The role of and support from e-tutors

6.3.1 Teacher's beliefs and commitment

- WeSU

In this case, most of the e-tutors supporting the learners in the pilot were also the developers of the modules.   All nine UK and Chinese module developers participated in the tutorial support for participants taking the unit that they personally were involved in developing.

It was believed by the e-tutors from the UK that for the e-learning programme to be truly effective, learning would require self-discipline and self-motivation as well as degrees of learner autonomy and independence. Learners should also be prepared with certain academic skills, especially in terms of critical thinking, academic writing, and developing and understanding of the concepts of knowledge construction, collaborative learning and action learning, in order to respond to the student-centred and collaborative approaches promoted by the modules.

> *In order for e-learning to be a truly effective method, the introduction to the materials that participants receive should really be more comprehensive and provide them with the appropriate study skills to properly engage in the virtual learning environment and the (new) pedagogic processes employed in the e-learning materials.*
>
> *(UK eTutor Report, WeSU, I)*

Similarly, the e-tutors supporting another unit offered eight key factors that they were felt essential：

> *good access to Internet technology for all, stable technology and learning platform that both e-tutors and learners are confident in using, e-tutors with appropriate skills*

and competences, extended learner induction that gives both e-tutors and learners the opportunity to 'practice' in the online environment, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for online learning, institutional/strategic support, a reasonable timescale - in addition to cultural and language factors

(UK eTutor Report, WeSU, III)

These statements show that UK course designers and e-tutors held strong beliefs on what constitutes an effective e-learning programme and set up these as 'essential' standards, including those that the e-learners themselves should also meet. However, arguably, these beliefs or experiences have derived from a context that is rather different from that in China. Thus, we are justified in being doubtful as to whether these experiences can be transferred from the West to the East. When there has been no or very limited attempt to try to understand the Chinese adult e-learners as they are in the case and the context as it is in China more generally, there could be a danger of a large gap existing between course designers' intentions and learners' actual experiences of the programme. Moreover, arguably, there would be no such 'ideal situation' in any learning setting, in which learners will be 'ready equipped' with all the 'essential learning skills' that will be needed in future learning. There are, therefore, some other 'essentials' for course designers to be aware of, such as where learners come from; what the gap is between their previous learning experiences and studying in the current e-learning programme; and how that gap can be filled when designing the course.

- ***JN case***

For all five teachers interviewed, this was their first experience of teaching on an e-learning course. Their responsibilities included preparing the learning materials for the subject they teach (selecting/editing the textbooks, recording

the video/audio lectures, helping to make the courseware); designing the course content and giving the online lectures.

The flexibility and convenience of e-learning in terms of time and place for learning are regarded by the teachers as the major advantage of e-learning, as advocated by the students in this case. However, it was also believed that the means of course delivery – online - itself inhibits the direct and intensive teacher-student interactions which could have happened in conventional face-to-face classroom settings. One teacher expressed this by saying:

Interpersonal communication cannot be replaced by any machine. Human care and communication are much more difficult to achieve in an online environment.

(Teacher Interview-JN, 2)

Consequently, teachers will not easily be able to follow students' learning progress because they cannot get direct, detailed feedback from students. Therefore, the shortage or the poor quality of interaction between teachers and students was regarded as a shortcoming of e-learning courses, which consequently undermined the teaching and learning process. The limited online subject resources were also mentioned by of the two teachers interviewed as a disadvantage for students taking an online course. It was pointed out in the interview that the accessibility of online journals and databases could be problematic outside the campus in the current situation.

Teachers interviewed had very limited knowledge about the discussion forum, except one interviewee who thought that online discussion could be an approach to facilitate students' understanding in an online environment and that students would take part in it if given proper direction and instruction.

Sometimes if students have any questions, and they put them on the internet, in the forum, probably other students have similar questions, then everyone can join and discuss about them. It's not necessary for me to give an answer immediately, as the school expected us to do. Through this kind of discussion, the students' understanding of the question can be deepened. I consider it's the better way to learn online. Of course, I will join the discussion.

(Teacher Interview-JN, 5)

Most other teachers interviewed admitted they were very unfamiliar with this communicative tool; this part of work was done by the TAs. One teacher even said, "*I even don't know where can be called 'discussion forum'!*" *(Teacher Interview-JN, 5)*

The teachers' commitment was another important factor which, in this case, inhibited their input. For all those teachers who were not from the School of Distance of Education (SoDE) itself, teaching in the course was some extra work outside their normal workload. As this teacher pointed out:

The input on the internet is invisible. And this is not part of my own teaching job from the department. So it's really difficult to spend too much time on it.

(Teacher Interview-JN, 3)

The programme director expressed a similar concern over the teacher management issues as she indicated that since teachers did not come from SoDE, it was difficult for her as programme director to ask for more commitment from those teachers (Field notes– JN, 3). This problem was perceived by learners, as reported in the focus group interviews:

… I think there is a big problem of SoDE in managing teachers…There are no fixed

teams of teaching staff, teachers come and go, they hardly know any of their students.

… Yes, they keep on changing teachers; if one teacher did well, his/her experiences would not get passed on to the next one…That has very bad influence on the whole teaching quality in the programme.

(Students Focus Group – JN)

It is worth noting in the JN case, much emphasis was put into producing teaching materials and teachers spent considerable time in writing textbooks, making courseware and CD-Roms, with the assistance of technicians (Field notes – JN, 2). This has reflected a common problem of e-learning in China: a shortage of teaching resources and inadequate collaboration among universities to share their teaching resources. Thus, arguably, this had a negative impact on teachers' commitment to devote themselves to interaction and communication with their students.

Teaching Assistant (TA) is a role set up mainly to take charge of the subject online discussion forum. Among three TAs interviewed, only one had part-time teaching experience. Their training was mainly about the technical issues, being provided by the school before they started the job.

The TAs interviewed perceived that the discussion forum should be a good means of communication between students and teachers in an online course. One TA gave an example:

Most of our students are working now. Sometimes they will raise some very practical questions and some thoughts they had during their work and we discuss these together. I think it was wonderful!

(TA Interview-JN, 3)

However, only one TA interviewed considered 'discussion' as the main function of the online discussion forum, while two others thought it is mainly for answering students' questions. It was evident that students were seen as not so active in the forum, which had a negative influence on their input:

At the beginning I posted some threads or case studies in the forum very often, but it seems not many students responded to it. So I started losing such enthusiasm later on.

(TA Interview-JN, 3)

One TA made this observation:

There are over one hundred of students in the forum I'm in charge of, but probably there are only less than twenty of them who come very often. The remaining large number of the students, they probably never come. The reason for this, I guess, is not being lazy, but they don't know how to use it – post threads, reply to others, and communicate with others through this.

(TA Interview-JN, 1)

It was also generally believed that the students were too busy with their full-time job and family so that the time they spent on the course study was very limited. More significantly, it was assumed that students were mainly motivated by getting the certificate. Thus they were seen as more 'utilitarian learners' who would only put in the minimal effort in order to survive in the course.

In general, encouraging students to take part in the discussion was not regarded by the TAs as their major responsibility and that such participation was something beyond their control.

6.3.2 Teacher's role and relationship with learners

- *WeSU case*

According to the course design, the e-tutors function as facilitators, motivators and validators. It was evident that e-tutors played a critical role in encouraging the participants to engage with learning as well as supporting them academically in the subject matter in the WeSU case. Some tutors expressed surprise at the level of input required:

When learners embark on a new programme of learning, teacher input is bound to be considerable at first. Here, the participants were also coping with a new way of learning, which also required technical know-how they did not necessarily have. So in terms of time, tutor input, or tutor 'presence', had to be substantial.   I am firmly convinced however, that were the participants to follow the full module, this investment in time would prove to be top-heavy.

(UK eTutor Report-WeSU, II)

I was at pains to ensure my presence could be seen on Moodle as a form of encouragement and academic support.   At first this meant that I responded to everything the participants posted.   I realised quite quickly that if the tutor jumps in at every forum posting, this inhibits the development of discussion between the participants, and reinforces participant assumptions that the tutor has the 'right' answer.

(UK eTutor Report-WeSU, II)

Some feedback from the learners made the e-tutor feel positive about the whole e-tutoring experience:

at the end of the unit I received some very nice comments from teachers who had participated saying how much they had enjoyed the unit. One in particular

thanked me for my 'prompt replies and feedback', which she found 'encouraging and motivating' and so in that sense I found the e-tutoring experience very worthwhile.

(UK eTutor Report-WeSU, I)

At the same time, some e-tutors did not see their role as fixed.

as the participants become more experienced e-learners - the tutor will be able to withdraw gradually, and to limit his/her 'presence' or 'visibility'. Certainly the participants will still expect guidance and support – but participant reliance on what I have noted as 'tutor validation' would - I am convinced - begin to decrease.

(UK eTutor Report-WeSU, II)

The inputs from the e-tutors were appreciated by learners in the focus group interview. The prompt feedback given was seen as very encouraging and showing a certain level of concern and care towards the learners, as this learners felt:

Although we are thousands of miles away from each other, we are like friends.

(Learners focus group-WeSU, 3)

But unfortunately there was no evidence of extensive and in-depth interactions and communications among the e-tutors and learners in the case. The short period of the pilot also inhibited the actual development of the learners and changing of the role of e-tutors. By contrast, strong preference for one-to-one communication with tutors was in evidence. Communication occurred much more intensively outside the module via email as an e-tutor noted,

Individual emails with teachers were much more productive and more informative.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, I)

However, this practice was deemed to be problematic by course designers and tutors and was not encouraged.

Whilst one-to-one communication has its place, an over-emphasis on it contradicts the very nature of the collaborative e-learning experience. I suggested many times to the individual participants that they share their thoughts on the Moodle, but they did not do so.

(UK eTutor Report -WeSU, II)

Many of the participants in the focus group also expected e-tutors to set up specific times for a tutor to join the VLE so that they could get more prompt feedback and 'closer contact' with tutors.

- *JN case*

In this case, teachers defined themselves as a guide and director to introduce students into a new field of study:

As a teacher, you have much more experience than the students, at least in this field, which means you should be able to give some thoughtful advice and suggestions to those who are new to it.

(Teacher Interview-JN, 3)

Giving clear instruction on what learners must know and highlighting the important and difficult content were seen as necessary parts of this kind of direction.

Although students may have different purposes of study and different expectations of what to gain from it, it would be necessary to introduce them to some basic,

well-received and less controversial knowledge in the field. After that, students can develop their own understandings or even debate with others. It's just like you can only defend yourself by knowing others.

<div align="right">

(Teacher Interview-JN, 4)

</div>

It was thought that learners' differences should be taken into account when one interviewee believed that different methods should be adopted to 'direct' and 'stimulate' different students to learn. However, it was also generally believed that for learning to be effective, particularly in this e-learning course, students' own effort, willingness to learning, self-discipline and self-dependence were most important. This reflects the belief in learners' will power in the learning process in the Confucian philosophy of education.

Students appreciated this kind of 'direction' given by teachers. They were expecting teachers would provide wise advice and suggestions on their learning, particularly in terms of understanding the new knowledge. However, as learning went on, they also found the guidance and support given were far from sufficient to support their learning. The teaching was seen as too 'content-focused' and students had a desire to know more about 'how to learn', as in this old Chinese saying quoted by one student:

Giving fish is not any better than teaching the way to fish.

<div align="right">

(Students Diary-JN, 3)

</div>

The answers given by TAs were not always satisfying and many students felt the teacher should be more 'authoritative' in the area of their subjective knowledge. Given the fact that the university is a prestigious HE institution in China and that many teachers are well-known scholars in the field, it is suggested that the teachers' authority is probably expected to be high in their

subject area. However, there was also no clear evidence that teachers always had the 'right' answers. Instead, students had doubts about the quality of teaching and to what extent teachers had understood their needs.

I believe the teachers are experts in the subject area. But I have doubt of the capability of them to help us to learn that knowledge effectively. They can tell me lots of things, but that won't make it become something belonging to you.

(Student Interview-JN, 5)

The teachers might not have had any experience quite similar to us, such as losing a job, reflecting what's gone wrong, seeking a job again and always trying to improve yourself in order to survive in the society. They might be under the impression that we all come for the qualification, but that's far from the whole story.

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

Good teaching was highly praised for being well planned and delivered as well as for the teacher's enthusiasm towards the teaching and students. By contrast, some poorly delivered lectures were reported as de-motivating students' learning to a great extent, where they made students feel they were not being taking seriously.

We have got some very bad feeling sometimes - Some teachers come to give a lecture for two hours, and get paid for these two hours. Then they won't bother to know all the rest of it – how we found their teaching, how we are getting on with the study, what kind of difficulties we might have, what support we might need!

(Students Focus Group-JN)

Teachers' attitude towards teaching and students will definitely influence our attitude

to learning; that's why we feel we are losing the enthusiasm we had at the beginning to some extent. And that made us think – ok, since we can't really learn something here, we just come for the qualification then!

(Students Focus Group-JN)

However, some students, instead of accepting the situation as it was, were trying to bring about change by talking to each other, thinking about the way to report the problem, etc. A transcript of the conversation between two students through online instant messenger send by a student as his dairy entries displays this:

17-05

Jin: The teaching quality has decreased so badly.

Bob: Yes, I agree

Jin: My son had fever that day, but I still went (to the lecture), but felt such regret towards my wife and my son afterwards, so-called 'lesson'!

Bob: Sorry to hear that.

Jin: I really felt indignant that evening! Like a nightmare.

Bob: But that won't help. If they don't take this seriously, there won't be any improvement on the teaching quality.

Jin: Such a course regarding 'Western Culture' should be a very precious comprehensive experience for us.

Bob: I agree.

Jin: I thought he would at least talk something about western culture for us that evening.

Bob: Yes, even I expect so.

Jin: He said he's taking someone's place but only got informed not long ago

Bob: So that means he's really prepared the lesson in a big hurry!

Jin: In the following coming days before graduation, more comprehensive exercise

seems precious and imperative for us.

Bob: Yes, I think you've got a point.

Jin: But there's only one lecture left in the next term. I think we should ask the school to give us some extra ones, good ones!

Bob: Maybe we should do it together, make it more powerful!

Jin: Yes, I think we should try to write a proposal to the head of school - Mr. Wang. He is an easy going person.

Bob: Yes, we should ask the school to choose the right person to teach us, such as Professor Zhao.

Jin: Yes, his photo has always been put on the front page of the school website as propaganda, but if we could not face him from a short distance, that will become a fake ad.

Bob: Yes, if Professor Zhao will never come to teach us, it seems like JN is cheating us!

Jin: I still miss Ms Sheng, Mr. Zhang, these teachers are excellent!

Bob: Yes, I agree! Such teachers are passionate, patient and intelligent!

Jin: We really need teachers like these to give us some more seminars!

Bob: Let's start from this semester! I will write a proposal, circulate to everyone in the course, and then send to the head of school!

Jin: Yes, thank you so much for doing that! I'll make sure once the school agrees to give these seminars there are plenty of us who will be attending it!

(Student Diary-JN, 4)

The students' effort had considerable effect: the lecturer posted his apology on the online forum for his poorly prepared teaching and the SoDE had agreed to re-arrange another lecture later in the term.

It is also clear that the more knowledge-driven the students were, the higher their expectations were and the stronger their desire to interact with teachers.

Each individual appeared to have different strategies to tackle different course content. One student interviewed, who had explained that their main objective in taking part in the course was passing the exam and getting the degree, revealed his expectation of teachers:

Of course it would be better to have more communication with teachers. But I realize it is not realistic in this course. So as long as they (the teachers) have made it clear in terms of what to do to pass the exam, that's ok.

(Student Interview-JN, 2)

However, more often, students expressed their frustration towards the interaction with teachers:

It just feels like a vacuum between the teachers and us in the gap between two online lectures.

(Student Interview-JN, 1)

It's really a pity that we don't have a chance to know our teachers. Some of them have a big name in the field, but they seem to far away from us and we can never reach them.

(Student Interview-JN, 3)

Not surprisingly, the lack of tutor support was reported as one of the biggest difficulties the students were facing, which reduced the quality of their learning significantly.

I have to say, some course materials I did not comprehend thoroughly. I have to compromise although I would rather have been able to understand it better. But it's hard sometimes without a teacher's help.

(Student Interview-JN, 13)

The support to students' learning was actually given by the TAs. However, in this case, the SoDE paid them a small amount of money for the work on online forums. The role defined by the TAs interviewed was more as an 'assistant' to the subject teachers, who were also their supervisors, rather than as a 'tutor' to the student. Therefore, the job was regarded more like a task given by their supervisor that had to be done. Consequently the commitment to work as a TA was inhibited.

One of the advantages of the course perceived by the course designers interviewed is that teachers and TAs know each other well so that *"they are having consistent views of the way to teach the subject." (Designers Interview-JN 1)* Unfortunately, it was reported that there was not much communication between them about the course and the students' learning process.

Normally we meet a couple of times with the lecturers when the course just started, to help with preparing the course materials. Most of the other time we deal with students, unless there are some questions we're really not sure about.

（TA Interview-JN, 2）

Occasionally the lecturers will ask how everything is going on in the course, but about 80% of the work was done by us [TAs] because the lecturers are too busy with their own teaching.

(TA Interview-JN, 1)

An interesting event was noticeable in the programme online forum: a group of students were taking the unit – "English Translation". One of the students posted a paragraph in the subject online discussion forum and asked the TA to

help with the translation. The TA refused to do so and gave the reason that it was "not part of his responsibility to answer a question beyond the course content". Another student replied to the thread and did the translation. However, very surprisingly, these threads were deleted by the TA from the forum, which caused intensive discussions against this action among the students. The whole of this discussion is reproduced below since it is felt that a summary would not adequately convey the strength of feeling among the students and their willingness to argue with the TA in a way which contradict stereotypes of the docile Chinese learner.

TA: ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT DELETING THE POST

This action was taken after my careful consideration. From my personal understanding, the forum is the place where everyone can raise their questions relevant to this "English Translation" unit but not the place to get the teacher to do the translation for students! So please do not raise any questions beyond the course content here. After all, as a student, there are some things you have to do by yourself!

Yuan: As a student in 0409 group, I have been studying in the school for nearly two years. With a sincerely willing heart for learning, we are expecting to learn really valuable knowledge in this well-known university. I must admit my subject knowledge is very limited and very often, I will come cross some very difficult contracts in my work, which need to be translated. Therefore, I hope to discuss some of them with the TA here and hope you, as a member of staff from the university, could give me some guidance and suggestions. That is all! But instead of getting your reply, the message was rudely deleted. This is a real shock for us. Wish you could do it with more careful consideration! - JN study centre, 0409 class committee

Young: Learning depends on good understanding; understanding depends on good communication. Sometimes participating in communication seems more important

than giving the right answers. If I could share the content of the deleted message now, I would like to face such a challenge and translate it carefully and then put it on this board as an exercise for further discussion. But now the message has been deleted…

Mazhihui: As a teacher, your role is to guide and support students. Particularly for students like us, we all come to study with our full-time jobs. Is that something easy to do? Can you ever understand how much extra effort we have made for this? After all, may I ask you – our respected teaching assistant - is there any knowledge that you can really separate between within the books and outside the books?

CJX: I studied in this university in 1989 and went overseas before graduation. Fifteen years later, I came back and wanted to come back to my 'mother university' to finish my degree. But I found there is so much difference in the university between now and that time. Now the university is more like a commercial company! I wish as a teacher, what you can do is not just simply deleting students' messages. You could always 'hide' in the university to avoid the fierce competition of the labour market, but for your students' sakes, for the honour of the university, I would be pleased if you do something more helpful! We - as students- will thank you, the university will thank you and the society will thank you!

Jsz010010:

This forum welcomes everyone asking questions. In order to learn this unit better, I suggest everyone try to understand the theories in the textbooks and do more translation practice.

Dear TA, this is your message posted in the forum earlier. But I'm really puzzled now; we are doing what you asked us to do, when we come across some questions, we ask for your help. But why do you show such antipathy to our questions and even deleted them?

Hope you can give us a reasonable explanation!

TA: As a reply to all these messages, I want to make another announcement here: I can NOT do the translation for any student!

As a teaching assistant, there are some things I can do, some things I can't. I deleted the message simply because it is not part of my responsibilities to do the translation for students and also the wording used in the message made me feel uncomfortable. Then there are some people here accusing me of 'avoiding responsibility' etc. I have never been in charge of any online discussion forum and didn't expect my action would cause such reaction. But I do not think I have done anything wrong in terms of this issue. So I won't be frightened of any consequences it may cause if anyone wants to make a complaint to the school!

YOUNG: Dear teacher, thank you for your prompt reply. I have worked as a teacher, I never thought there are any 'bad' questions raised by students and similarly, I don't think a teacher who dislikes students' questions could be a good teacher. Maybe you felt your student has offended you by some 'impolite' wording used in the question unconsciously, but you may also lose the chance to make friends with a young fellow through the wonderful discussions.

…My office is based just near the university. If it is possible for you to offer me some time, I would like to have a chat with you. My office telephone number is (XXX). Looking forward to your phone call anytime at your convenience!

(Field Notes - JN, 6)

There are a few observations that can be made from these messages: firstly, students seemed to have a better understanding of the function of discussion forums than the TA did – 'participating in the discussion is more important than providing the right answer'. Secondly, there were different understandings and expectations of the relationship between teachers and students. The nature of

support to students, as understood by TA, was not doing something for them. It is important to note here that the learners – in common with most who are likely to engage with e-learning – were adults with considerable experience of the world, perhaps even more than the TA, as one student pointed out in the above excerpt. They came to the learning situation with clear aims and expectations that include mutual respect and a relationship between equals rather than the hierarchical relationship that may be more usual with younger, less experienced students and their teacher.

It seems that the use of language was also at the heart of the problem. The TA felt uncomfortable with the student's original message and may have perceived a threat to his status as 'the teacher'. This leads to the important observation that the rules of communication in writing are very different from those that govern speaking, particularly face-to-face speaking. In a very real sense here, 'the medium is the message' and both sides in any written communication have to learn how to communicate effectively in this medium, in an online environment, if the message is not to become confused or a source of conflict. The implication of this is that there is a need for specific training of teachers in effective communication in this new environment and we cannot expect transfer of experience in different environments alone to lead to effective communication here.

6.4 Course content, structure and organisation

- WeSU case

The modules were viewed by the students as being rich in content and resources. The materials that were embedded case studies and video clips were particularly welcomed because they were seen as providing participants with good examples and resources connected with their classroom teaching practice. Video clips were considered to be both interesting and easy to follow

because they present some classroom activities in great detail. A large number of useful online teaching and learning resources, including embedded URLs were thought to have contributed to widening their views, inspiring and enriching their teaching ideas.

It was clear that participants had high expectations of the practical implications of the course content. Some topics chosen were thought to be 'too far away from our concerns of everyday teaching' and thus less interesting to learn; some materials were appreciated for their inspiration and guidance towards the participants' teaching practice. However, the desire for the more practice-related materials was thought by the course designers as a misunderstanding held by the participants that the modules were simply designed to provide resources for subject specific teaching.

The mode of material delivery – solely online - was seen as inappropriate and inhibited learning. Many of the participants experienced difficulties in getting access to the internet, both in terms of the time it took, the connection speed and the stability.

Although I'm aware this is an online course, I don't think we should be restricted by this as the only means. For instance, when there is something wrong with the internet, which is very likely happen sometimes, we can't see anything any more! So we have to stop (learning)!

(Learners Focus Group-WeSU, 1)

I'm using the telephone line at home to connect to the internet. So some video clips are too big for me to watch online. It will be much better to provide a link to download it.

(Learners Focus Group-WeSU, 2)

You are learning there, you know, which means you need time to think, sometimes

quite a long period of time to think through something. But you have to be online all

this time! This is really not so convenient for me because I have to pay the internet

connection by the hour!

<div align="right">

(Learners Focus Group-WeSU, 3)

</div>

Therefore, for these in-service teachers who have to find time to study in their busy schedule, multiple modes of delivering course materials were felt to be more desirable. Moreover, most parts of the course content were felt to be more culturally rooted in the UK. There is also an important issue of language, that seemed not to have been considered carefully in the course design. Although all the participants are teachers of English in primary or secondary schools, they found it was difficult to learn the materials from the original text books, which were full of academic jargon and terms from an unfamiliar field. Thus participants expressed in the focus group interviews that a bilingual glossary would really have helped them learn. These barriers might explain the 'disappointment' among designers and tutors that participants did not follow the course content as expected.

Some of the modules were perceived to be well-structured by having the materials divided into different learning sections, core issues, summary, etc. It was thought that this division made the structure clearer to the participants and saved their time in navigating and finding out the learning objectives. However, more generally, there was confusion over the aims and objectives of each unit. Moreover, it was evident that some learners were very often not working through the units in order as the designer expected.

A number of teachers started work on the unit prior to the 'official' start date of

March 21.   Although this meant that initial and subsequent discussions were

somewhat staggered, I doubt it would have been reasonable to insist that everyone

start at the same time.   *(UK eTutor Report-WeSU, II)*

- JN Case

Similarly, more practice-focused course content was more interesting to the students and students showed more enthusiasm for learning this in depth in this case. As shown previously, strong orientations towards career and personal development led to the aspiration to learn something 'useful'.

We are not learning for its own sake, we want to learn something to be able to use!

(Students Diary-JN, 5)

In this case, the course content was set up partly according to the national curriculum for distance education. Therefore, some compulsory course units which were thought 'no use' and just 'wasting time' were learned simply in order to pass the exam.

I'm very practical indeed. Something I think is useful for me, I learn. Otherwise, I don't want to waste my time on it…Some of these theories are too 'empty' for me. But I've still got to find time to do these 'unnecessary' units to survive in the course, which has made me really frustrated.

(Students Focus Group-JN)

Many of the students expressed their willingness to choose the content that they are more interested in learning.

I wish we had more choices on what we learn. We are different from the students who have always been in school. We might have much more complex aims and

interests. Too fixed content is hard to meet our needs.

<p style="text-align:right">*(Students Diary-JN, 2)*</p>

However, it was also evident that, in contrast, some students felt less confident of choosing the course content by themselves and thought it would be better to leave this job to the teachers.

It was reported that there was a knowledge gap for those students who had left the school/college for some years and come back to study on the course. Some of these students experienced some difficulties in following the course content, particularly in the early stage of their study.

The course structure was regarded as clear and easy to find one's way around. Learning objectives were made clear at the beginning of each unit. But it was reported that students would have liked to see the rationale of the whole course structure, the links and relationship between the different units. This interviewee provided a metaphor to express his feeling:

It's like the difference between you walking in the daytime and at night. In the daytime, you can probably see your destination, and the possible routes, you feel much better because you know what you are doing. However, at night, over the same distance you might feel you can never reach there.

<p style="text-align:right">*(Students Interview-JN, 9)*</p>

More opportunities to apply the theory into practice were required. Many students were of the opinion that the course should provide them some connections with work placements or provide them with the chance to see how the theories they learnt applied to social practice.

The findings also showed some other problems in the course organization and delivery as reported by students. Many students felt the course fee was too high compared with the quality of the education they had received. It was also felt there were problems with the management of the learning support centres, which were set up as the local contact with students and to facilitate their learning. One student expressed this in the focus group:

Learning (support) centres should act as 'windows' of SoDE but now it looks like all the learning centres do is to take your money, give your materials and organize the exams. They don't care about all the rest of it: whether students have any problems, will they need any help…So it looks to me a pure 'businesses' rather than education. I guess that's the relationship between learning centres and SoD:, you employ students for me; I share the profit with you…

(Student focus group – JN)

However, this was clearly not the message delivered by the course manager and designers. On the opening ceremony for a new year-group of students, the programme director declared that the course would "first serve the social and educational purpose and then the economic purpose" (Field notes – JN, 5). The conflicting picture does, however, reflect some common problems in e-learning development in China. On the one hand, it is responding to the national policy on lifelong learning and trying to enhance the lifelong learning opportunities with the aid of the internet; on the other hand, the government has encouraged the business sector to invest in developing ICT applications for education, so that instant return became an issue for any business investment (Gu, 2006). This problem, plus the lack of criteria for online institutions to manage their learning support centres has certainly had a negative influence on the teaching quality delivered in these e-learning programmes in China.

6.5 Peer collaboration and communication

The most enjoyable part of the learning experience in both cases was reported to be that of the interaction and communication with other students. It was found that there was a high level of spontaneous collaboration amongst learners. In the WeSU case, participants enjoyed the discussions among themselves most in face-to-face situations. In JN, students used emails and online forums to build up the initial contacts. Later on, they tended to use communicative tools they used in everyday life to keep in touch, such as telephone, mobile-phone text messages, QQ (an instant messenger programme, similar to MSN) or even face-to-face meetings. Learners organized online groups at QQ according to different subjects and the year of study. The QQ Group became a very important venue for every class to build up connections, exchange information, solve the problems of study, do the assignments, prepare for the examination and organize some social events for students from the same place to meet up. It is interesting to note that students doing the same subject in the same study were organized as a 'class' in a similar way to that in a traditional classroom teaching programme. So there was a class teacher and class committee who would organize whole class activities including some social gatherings. These social activities were evidently extensive and made a great contribution to the relationship that students from the same 'class' in the same city built up. Therefore,

The best thing abvout coming to this course is that I got to know so many people who are doing the same course. We are varied in age, profession and location. But we help each other and learn from each other. Many of us became very good friends. This is something really wonderful!

(Student Interview-JN, 1)

The friendship and familiarity built up from these contacts seemed to lay a solid foundation for communication and collaboration in their learning process. Many learners saw this peer interaction as essential for their learning.

Learning mainly depends on yourself but it does not happen by isolating yourself. You need to find learning partners, need to have discussion with them.

(Student Interview-JN, 6)

Since we have different educational backgrounds as the starting point of embarking on this course and it is unrealistic to interact with teachers a lot, collaboration is the only solution!

(Student Interview-JN, 8)

You need this to stop you feeling isolated in this kind of online course.

(Open Questions Entries-JN)

These intensive spontaneous collaborations appeared to take place both online and off-line. When it was online, a synchronous communicative tool was seen to be more preferable to use, like chatting facilities. One of the most interesting examples given by an interviewee of their collaboration was that they organized classmates from the same city to meet up regularly, to deal with the difficulties in the learning process, giving tutorials to each other, preparing for the examinations together. This kind of collaboration was very effective from participants' point of view.

However, there was also a drawback to this intensive peer collaboration. Xiaohua was a head student in his class. He had obtained his first degree in another well-known university and came to study in the JN programme because he was interested in the subject he had chosen. Xiaohua is a kind and

warm-hearted person and always willing to help to others in the classroom. However, some of Xiaohua's classmates started to rely on him in completing some learning tasks. As Xiaohua recorded in his diary:

5-23

Today a classmate of mine called me and asked for the answer of the online exercise! Now the online exercise just came out and more and more classmates start asking me for answer, leave messages in my QQ, ring my mobile....One even said he's got problem to go online, can I do the online exercise for him before the deadline!! I don't really mind doing these because I do understand how difficult it is for people with a busy working schedule to meet those deadlines. But I keep on telling them "even you have got the answer, you should still find time to do it again on your own." But I'm not sure how many of them will do so. So I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing in the end.

(Students Diary – JN, 7)

This finding raises the issue of plagiarism in online assessment as some have discussed in the research literature (e.g. Marais et al, 2005; Caroll, 2002). Because online assessment is more difficult to supervise, it is much more difficult to ensure the validity of the assessment result.

This chapter has presented and discussed qualitative data gathered in this research that address the central research questions, while being sensitive to issues that emerged from the data themselves. In the next chapter, these findings will be further discussed within the theoretical framework established earlier, with the aims of providing more conclusive answers to the research questions and placing these in wider intellectual and practical contexts

Chapter 7

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings provide an overall picture of learners' e-learning experiences in the two cases, in particular highlighting their motivations and orientations to the learning, their experiences in e-learning environments based on different pedagogical designs, modes of interaction with their teachers and peers, as well as their perception and usage of technologies in supporting their learning. In this chapter, these research findings will be compared across the two cases and linked with the literature reviewed in the previous chapters; and these will be further discussed in the light of Archer's critical realist theoretical perspective, in order to answer the research questions posed initially (see p.11). In addition, conclusions are drawn from the research and implications for the further design and implementation of e-learning in a Chinese context.

7.1 E-learners' personal identity and commitment to learn

There was a variety of learners' self-defined reasons, intentions and motivations for taking part in the two e-learning courses. From a critical realist perspective, none of the properties and powers of subjects are understandable in isolation from the natural, material and social reality (Archer, 2000a). Personal identity emerges after individuals have reflexively surveyed these three orders of reality, considered their response to their encounters with them and then determined where their ultimate concerns lie and how others are to be accommodated to them (Archer, 2000a). Similar ideas are expressed by Giddens who argues that identity is the product of our conscious action and the outcomes of on-going reflexive processes where individuals construct and reconstruct their

self-perception in the light of their response to their social surroundings (Giddens, 1991). During this process, individuals attempt continuously to understand, maintain, monitor and revise their actions and their consequences (Layder, 1994; Scott, 1995). The notion of learner identity, therefore, helps us link learners' experiences to wider socio-economic contexts. That is to say, it is during this process of forming learners' personal identity, negotiating and reflecting on their relationships to reality, that learners develop their reasons, intentions and motivations in coming to learn. Archer's ontological framework (Figure 3.1) has given a comprehensive account of the process of learners' decision making in prioritising their concerns. Learning is seen as an inseparable part of life, any decisions made by learners about their course study are closely linked with their concerns in other contexts. Their commitment to learn reflects the process of negotiation and accommodation of their different concerns and thus cannot be understood without taking account of them.

7.1.1 Promoting personal concerns in course study

The data indicate that the reasons for these adult e-learners to attend the course are diverse, given their mixed background and life experiences. Two major themes emerged in interviews, echoing the questionnaire results: career relevance and personal development. One theme that has been widely identified in adult learning is that adult learners tend to have clear purposes in their learning and like their learning activities be more pragmatically problem-centred (e.g. Brookfield, 1986, Knowles, 1980, 1987). The findings in this study support this, in that learners in both cases showed strong aspirations to learn something 'useful' to their current or future career. This finding is also in line with much of the research conducted in classroom settings, showing that a substantial proportion of students in the Chinese context are motivated both by the prospect of getting a good job and by an interest in the course material itself (e.g. Kember et al, 1999; Lee, 1996). On the one hand, the career-related

motivation reflects a belief in the importance of academic success for career enhancement in Chinese philosophical tradition; on the other hand, the career-related motivation reflects the increasing demand for highly skilled human labour to meet the needs of socio-economic development in China. Understandably, given the instrumentalist motivation to take the course, the findings show that there was a closely related concern over the credibility of the qualification. The qualification offered in the JN case was found to be a positively motivating factor, in contrast to the absence of a qualification in the WeSU case. As indicated previously, cross-cultural research in conventional classroom settings, such as that by Salili, Chiu & Lai(2001) or Volet & Renshaw (1996), has found that an aspiration to better job prospects from learning should not be harshly judged as extrinsic motivation when it is combined with an interest in knowledge itself. I would support such caution against misjudgement, based on the findings documented in the study: the career relevant motivation can co-exist with a strong desire to apply knowledge to practice and with an interest in the subject knowledge in an (e)learning environment.

Their strong aspiration for career relevance drives learners to value the practical application of course material, which becomes the benchmark for them to make decisions on how much effort they are prepared to make to go through the course content. Rich, authentic content was felt to be 'exciting', 'easy to follow' and stimulated learners to work hard; when course content was found to be 'not very useful' and 'too far away from the daily life and working practice', the time and effort required are regarded as 'extra demands and costs', that learners are unwilling to pay. Unfortunately, dissatisfaction was expressed in both cases over the course materials in providing the links to their daily practice.

From this perspective, it might be worth reconsidering the meaning of the term

– 'passive learners' – which has been used to describe those who were only making the minimal effort required to get through the examinations. As indicated above, the level of commitment to learning, the precise course of action and thus learning strategies adopted were based on the learners' reflexive consideration of their situations and decisions on what they care about most. "[W]e possess the powers of both resistance and subversion or of co-operation and adaptation" (Archer, 2007:8). Therefore, I would argue that these learners are not intrinsically 'passive' but actively making their decisions by measuring the extent to which the course is able to fulfil their urgent needs and ultimate concerns, and how much they are prepared to pay the cost to see their projects through in the face of structural hindrances. In line with Morgan's (1993) assertion, learners were found not to be more or less motivated but paying different degrees of attention and emphasis to different aspects of the course as they are attempting to achieve different ends from their study. Thus, the key questions to be considered for the course designers is probably - "Do we know what learners really want and how to meet these learning needs in the course?"

Reflecting the theme in Confucian philosophical tradition, personal development has a very broad meaning in Chinese context as shown by learners' beliefs and intentions to learn found in the study. Personal development is a lifelong striving which entails enhancing knowledge, developing all-round skills, doing better in one's career and making one's life more meaningful. One's internal establishment (development as a person) thus always correlates with external performance (successful career, academic achievement, etc), and these should not be seen as exclusive to each other.

Overall, e-learners held the belief that attending the courses can promote their concerns – improving working efficiency or work-related skills; obtaining a

qualification to promote career development; gaining knowledge that is interesting or can improve oneself as a person. Therefore, the extent to which the course experience meets their expectations and learning needs forms the basis of learners' decision making on their commitment to learn.

7.1.2 Striking the balance among different commitments

The broad age range and social diversity of learners in the study means that the majority of learners had other commitments (domestic, employment, etc) apart from their studies. Consequently, learners were evidently constrained to strike a balance between their inescapable human concerns in relation to different aspects of reality. In line with the findings of Howland & Moore (2002), students reported difficulties in organising their time in the online course while continuing to work and fulfill family obligations and for many of them, time is their primary concern (cf. Allan, 2004; Cramphon, 2004; Meyer, 2003; Sweeney et al, 2004). This study's findings also support the argument made by Gu (2007), that the need for self-management of the learning process may place extra demand on the learner's limited cognitive/practical resources, which can be extremely difficult to deal with, particularly for these adult learners. The learners placed much emphasis on the importance of self-motivation and willingness to learn in helping to develop time-management skills. At the same time, the findings also highlighted several aspects from the course design and delivery that influenced learners' decision making in striking a balance between study and other aspects of their life.

- The provision of learning materials

When the printed, hard-copy textbook was transferred to on-line material or hyperlink, the burden of carrying and managing a heavy paper load may have been reduced. However, given the evidence found in the research that learners' access to ICT was rarely ideal and unrestricted in both of these two cases, this

solely on-line provision was thus inappropriate. That the learning material could not be accessed otherwise than on-line was reported as inconvenient and inhibiting learning by many participants in the WeSU case. In line with the findings of Hara and Kling (1999), the learners experienced considerable frustration with the technical aspects of learning online where the access to learning material had a large part to play; for instance, the unreliability of the internet connection, extra costs incurred in accessing the internet and printer, the limited speed for downloading the material and restricted access in the working place. By contrast, in the JN case, the multiple forms of learning materials provided enabled students to manage their time more effectively: the paper material allowed the flexibility of working with materials in any place without any special equipment being required, audio- and video- materials provided different means of accessing rich and vivid contents, and the courseware allowed them to study the materials repeatedly according to their own learning pace and needs.

E-learning is constructed in both the physical and the virtual environment and each part cannot be meaningfully separated from the other. The findings support the argument of Moore and Aspden (2004), that effective provision of learning materials and resources allows students to exploit their time in the physical and virtual environments to their best advantage. This is in line with the findings of Gu (2007) that multimedia presentation of learning material is one of the principles of good e-learning design. Therefore, in the provision of course materials both the pros and cons of ICT in relation to the learners' personal context should be considered in course design and choices should be provided, so that the potential for flexibility in e-learning can be better achieved.

- The design of course structure and learning tasks
The initial anxiety for most first-time on-line learners in this study was

compounded when there was a lack of understanding about what they were required to do. The findings in the study reinforce this observation, where poorly defined learning objectives evidently impeded learning to a great extent in the WeSU case. As Knowles (1975) has pointed out, adult learners want to know why they need to know something. They have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions and their own lives. Although it has to be acknowledged that this might not be a phenomenon unique to adult learners, for most adult learners who came to the course with clear aims and intentions, it is still important to be informed of the rationale in the design of the course structure, which would help them to make informed decisions about their study. Other adult learning researchers, such as Brookfield, (1986) reject an over-emphasis on the need for adults to establish beforehand the purpose and intent of their learning activities. However, Morgan (1993) emphasis that it is being fair to inform learners what is expected from them. The confusion over the overall objectives of the course, the demands of the learning tasks, and the assessment method, as reported in this study has caused problems for learners in prioritising their different commitments and organising their learning in more effective ways.

The division of the materials into distinct units was welcomed by the learners in both cases (cf. Beasley and Smyth 2004); they felt this saved their time in navigating the site. A non-linear organisation of the materials may be seen as more attractive to designers to support flexible learning but it might be less appropriate in practice for adult learners who had distinct blocks of free time to spending studying.

Learners' different concerns and commitments were not, however, always in conflict with each other. Some argue that Chinese students' achievement motivation is partly influenced by Chinese collective culture (e.g. Salili, 1996).

The findings of this study also suggest some learners see their academic success and failure not just as a personal matter but as 'repayment' or an expression of loyalty to the family. This was manifested as a driving force for many students to study harder. However, it is interesting to note that in a recent study of U.K. students' e-learning experience, family relations was identified as an important influence on students' learning experiences (Creanor et al, 2006).

7.1.3 Learning as an on-going emotionally charged process

According to Archer, the emergence of personal identity is an emotionally charged process, rather than being a simple exercise in instrumental rationality (Archer, 2000a). This study reveals that e-learning is indeed also an emotionally charged experience that forms as part of the learner's personal identity. Emotions such as anxiety, isolation, frustration, excitement, contentment, disappointment and guilt have been evidenced in students' experiences during the learning process - dealing with the course demand, getting access to the course materials, using the learning technologies, trying to balance study and other commitments, communicating and interacting with teachers and peer students, etc. These emotions are the fuel to learners' reflections on their relationship to the three orders of reality and form the basis for the different courses of action observed. For instance, anxieties and confusions of online learning methods and communication within the VLE left any significant level of discussion under-developed; frustrations caused by being unable to reach the teachers left the desire to interact with teachers unfulfilled; pressure from a full-time job led the time-consuming communicative means promoted by the course designers to be judged less favourable and the non- practical course content less welcomed.

Moreover, the findings revealed that learners' motivation and commitment to

learn are not fixed but undergo revision through the learners' reflexivity in the light of further experience.

> What this subject is doing is conducting an endless assessment of whether what it once devoted itself to as its ultimate concern(s) are still worthy of this devotion, and whether the price which was once paid for subordinating and accommodating other concerns is still one with which the subject can live. If the answer is affirmative, then we have a person who has determined to marshal his or her personal powers into a genuine act of commitment.
>
> (Archer, 2000a:297)

The evidence in the study, in particular as reported in learners' diaries in the JN case has shown that learning is such a dynamic process. As a result of learners' ceaseless reflection about life and the learning situations in which learners find themselves, the commitment to learn undergoes a process of change and modification. To what extent learners have found the study fits into their life as a whole and meets their genuine interests and ultimate concerns weighs crucially on their decisions about learning commitments and strategies they adopted. Above all, "life is not just a process of learning" (Archer, 2000a:298) but learning is a process transforming life experiences.

7.2 E-learners' social identity and the emergence of a learning community

According to Archer (2000a), our 'social selves' are something that emerges at the interface of 'structure and agency', as a result of the human powers (PEPs) acting upon the impacts of structural (SEPs) and cultural (CEPs) powers. In the following discussion, Archer's theorising of the emergence of social identity is

employed to examine how the interplay between learners' personal powers (PEPs) and the constraints and enablements from their e-learning environments and wider social cultural contexts (SEPs and CEPs) has enabled or constrained the emergence of a learning community.

7.2.1 A brief summary of Archer's (2000a) theorising of social identity

Archer (2000a) introduces a *stratified view* of 'the subject' whose different properties and powers (PEPs) emerge at each level: the *self*, the *person*, the *agent* and the *actor*. Among these, the self – the continuous sense of being one and the same subject - emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness which lasts throughout life. The process through which agents transform themselves in pursuing social change is termed socialisation and is summarised in Figure 7.1
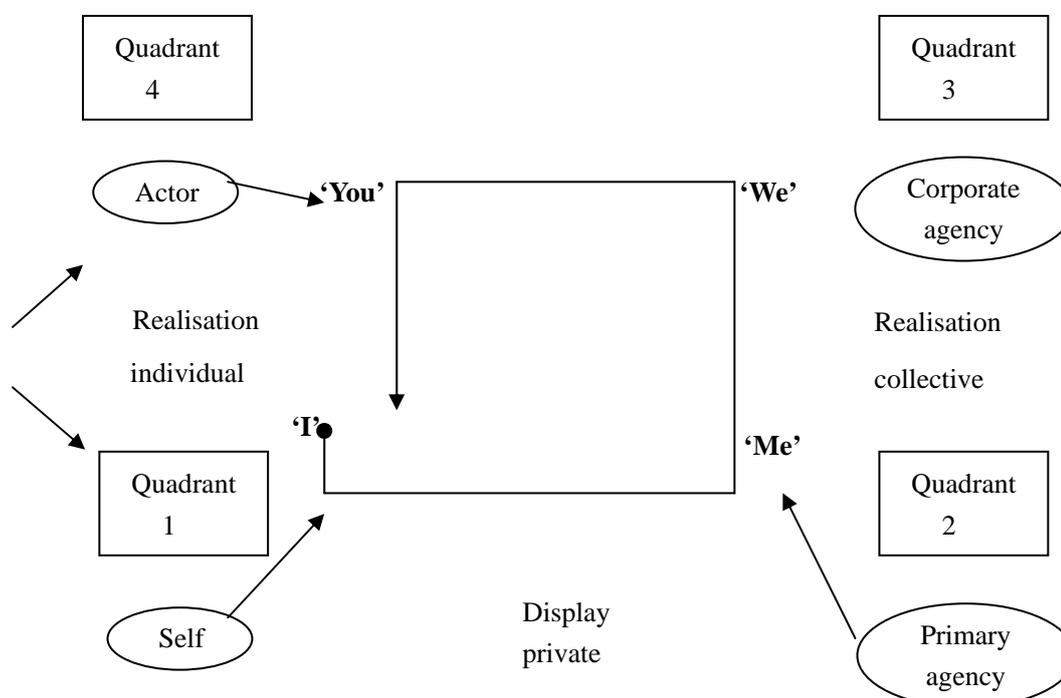
Figure 7.1 The acquisition of social identity (Archer, 2000a:295)

Primary Agents are defined as "collectivities sharing the same life-chances" (Archer 2000a:261) and therefore everyone is necessarily an Agent because "we are all assigned to positions on society's distributions of scarce resources" (Archer, 2000a:261-2). The pre-existence of those structures which shape the situation in which we find ourselves impinges upon us without our compliance, consent or complicity, leading to the aggregate status of Primary Agents. In order to reshape or retain the structural and/or cultural features, collective action that has systemic consequences has to be developed. 'Corporate Agents' are those "who articulate shared interests, organise for collective action, generate social movements and exercise corporate influence in decision-making" (Archer, 2000a:266). Archer (2000a) distinguishes Primary Agents from Corporate Agents as Primary Agents neither express interests nor organise for their strategic pursuit, either in society or in a given institutional sector. Moreover, for Primary Agents, Archer emphasises that "lack a say is not the same as have no effect upon it *[structural transformation]*, but the effects are unarticulated in both senses of the word – unco-ordinated in action and unstated in aim" (Archer, 2000a:266).

Corporate Agents are active in the sense that they are attempting to bring about certain outcomes, rather than being objects to whom things happen. At the same time, Primary Agents are not deemed intrinsically passive and their passivity represents a suspension of immediate action, often a deliberate suspension (Archer, 2000a:266).

In Figure 7.1, the acquisition of social identity in Quadrants 3-4 is underpinned by the self-conscious human being – 'self' – who emerges through the 'primacy of practice'. This is the 'I' described in Figure 7.1. The 'Me' is the self-as-object who is involuntarily placed within society as a Primary Agent. The 'We', however, represents the collective action in which the self engages as part of

Corporate Agency's attempt to bring about social transformation. The positions then created that the 'You' can acquire, accept and personify and thereby become an Actor possessing strict social identity (Archer, 2000a:294-5). As pointed previously, the social and structural transformations are not the focus in this study given the scale and time involved. However, the process of socialization of Primary Agency, in particular from Quadrant 2-3 in Figure 7.1, can be employed to analyse the data to reach an understanding of the emergence of an e-learning community as revealed in this study.
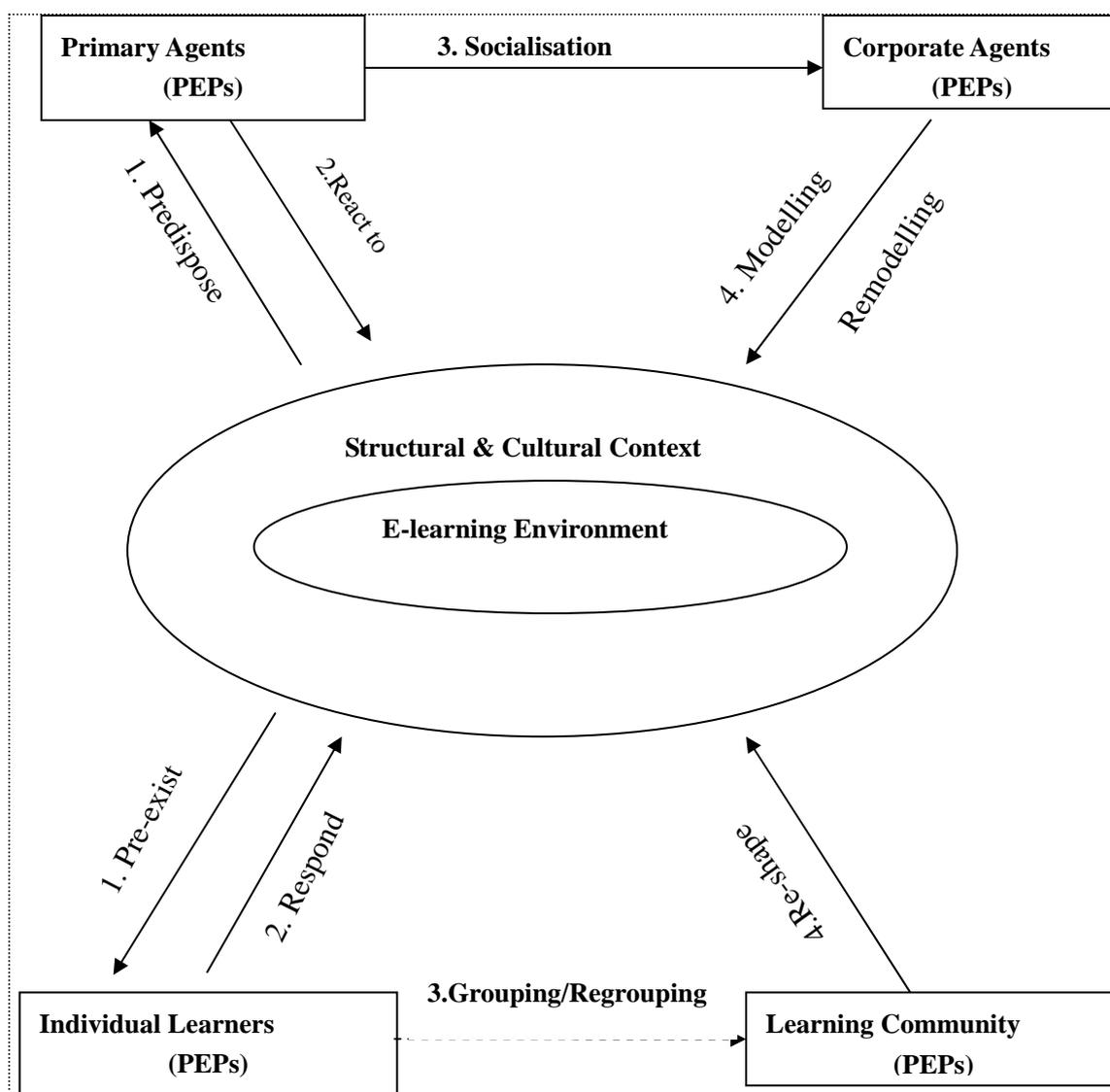
Figure 7.2 The emergence of the (e) learning community

In the Figure 7.2, the upper part of the figure depicts Archer's model of the acquisition of social identity as represented in Figure 7.1, showing the process of socialisation of Primary Agents being transformed into Corporate Agents. Corresponding to that, the lower part shows the formation of a learning community in an e-learning context. In an e-learning environment, learners come to study in an on-line course as individuals. The pre-existence of course content, structure, pedagogy, teaching method, communicative means and technology adopted, plus the institutional environment and culture have shaped the course context in which e-learners are going to learn. Individual learners, in this sense, can be seen in *this* context as Primary Agents, who are assigned to similar positions in the course and share similar resources available. However, because of learners' personal power – reflexivity - they act back on these structural settings. In forming a learning community, individual learners may *(or may not)* undergo "re-grouping" at some precise point by articulating their shared interests or organising collective actions with others to achieve common aims.

Wenger (1998) characterises three dimensions of community of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Common features can be found between these characteristics and Archer's theorisation. By organising their strategic pursuit, Corporate Agents obtain their membership in a community of practice. This mutual engagement does not require homogeneity but requires being included in what matters (Wenger, 1998). The things that matter are referred to as a joint enterprise by Wenger (1998), which in turn can create a source of community coherence; and for Archer (2000a), the thing that matters is an articulated shared interest. Both authors believe that this joint enterprise results from a negotiated response to the situations in which people find themselves. Moreover, they both recognise the pre-existence of structural and cultural factors (SEPs and CEPs) in shaping the situations, plus

specific resources being available and the existence of constraints. Archer (2000a), in particular, specifies that the distribution of those available resources can include both the material and the ideational. The power to form collective action (Archer, 2000a) or achieve mutual engagement towards a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998) resides with the participants. For Archer, the nature of our human powers - reflexivity - means that "the actual outcomes are matters of secondary determination, governed by our inner deliberations about such obstructions and facilitations, under our own descriptions. We often have the capacity to suspend both" (Archer, 2007:8). In a similar vein, Wenger argues that: "Yet even when the practice of a community is profoundly shaped by conditions outside the control of its members, as it always is in some respects, its day-to-day reality is nevertheless produced by participants within the resources and constraints of their situations. It is their response to their conditions, and therefore *their* enterprise" (Wenger, 1998:79). Attention has thus been draw into this 'indigenous enterprise of community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) or 'human power in mediating structural factors' (Archer, 2000a) without ignoring the influence of structural and cultural factors (SEPs and CEPs). Therefore, to examine the interplay of these two set of powers in the e-learning contexts by the aid of this diagram can assist with interpreting and understanding the findings of the study regarding the emergence of a learning community in the two cases, as is unfolded in the following discussion.

7.2.2 The emergence of learning community

According to the discussion above, a learning community emerges when a group of individual learners has articulated its shared interest or joint enterprise through negotiation, and organised strategic pursuit to achieve this stated target, and its collective actions in turn have exerted effects to bring about situational change.

Inspired by the Social Constructivist approach to learning, course designers in the WeSU case put great emphasis on building a shared community of practice in their learning design, and expected the learners to learn to collaborate through discussion and reflection. However, the findings revealed that neither sufficient in-depth discussion nor effective collaboration developed. A learning community did not emerge as the course designers had expected.

However, there was no lack of common interest in the course among the learners in this case, such as interest in the subject knowledge and improving working efficacy. Moreover, learners were also evidently eager to share their learning and working experience, exchange ideas and solve problems together. The face-to-face informal discussions during the course study with their peers in the same school were very intensive. Therefore, some problems can be highlighted, such as the poorly functioning communicative tools promoted by the course designers, and too limited a number of participants taking the same module so that these common interests failed to be articulated and developed into a workable joint enterprise. Consequently, actions remained un-coordinated and individual learners did not progress beyond being Primary Agents.

By contrast, in the JN case, despite the more content-focused course design, high levels of spontaneous collaboration and discussion amongst learners were evident. Learners made intensive use of the communicative tools they used in everyday life as well as the forum provided by the school to build up an intensive network. On-line social space (the QQ Group) was used as an important venue for communication and collaboration and every class had its own on-line group space set up by its members. Class committees were also set up with the aid of the university. During this process, the negotiation and achievement of the joint enterprise was enabled, giving rise to coherence of

practice in a learning community. Extensive activities, including information sharing and exchanging, dealing with assignments and exams and solving problems were in evidence in the on-line forums and group space. Geographical proximity also helped group members interact with each other more directly. Some of them set up face-to-face meetings and study groups with peers in the same city. Going beyond the face-to-face meetings and discussions of the course, the class committee also organised some social events and activities from time to time to gather people together. One of the most enjoyable and positive experiences reported by many learners in this case was meeting their peer students and developed relationships with them. Wenger (1998) has argued that what it takes for a community of practice to cohere enough to function can be very subtle and delicate, and this coherence also requires work. In this case, the course provided a platform, although unintentionally, where learners were able to link up with each other, and share their common interests and concerns as a means of mutual support to help them successfully navigate the course.

Archer (2000a) argues that human power-reflexivity mediates the influence of structural factors and she differentiates between their 'existence' and their 'effects'. This can explain the gap found between the course designers' intentions and learners' actual experiences in both cases. Similarly, Wenger (1998) argues that an enterprise can never be fully determined by an outside mandate, by a prescription, or by any individual participant, but can only be negotiated by the community that conditions and resources practice, and whose demands shape that practice. It is *'their'* (learners') learning community to emerge where *'their'* (learners') negotiated joint enterprise will be necessary as a source of community of coherence.

On the other hand, individual agents cannot make whatever they want from the

situation but are constrained by the ideational and material resources available (Archer, 2000a). Wenger (1998) has argued that whatever it takes to make mutual engagement possible is an essential component of any practice. The limited number of students taking the same module made it difficult for learners in the WeSU case to find peers to 'share information' with. Consequently, the process of negotiation and discussion was inhibited, particularly since this limitation was combined with the short duration of the programme, weakly defined learning objectives and assessment method, unfamiliarity with the pedagogy and communicative tools employed, as well as language barriers. What we observe here, therefore, is an example of agential power constrained by a combination of structural powers. The significance of user number in increasing engagement as identified in this study is in line with Crook's (2008) observation that the growth in the sheer number of internet users contributes to the popularity of social networking where people share and exchange information and interact with each other.

Furthermore, learners who gained their membership in the learning community were apparently those who had transformed from Primary Agents to Corporate Agents: "who know what they want, can articulate it to themselves and to others, and have organised in order to obtain it, can engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural and/or cultural features in question" (Archer, 2000a:265). The learners' experiences in the JN case have illustrated such agential power in articulating shared interests, organising for collective actions and exercising corporate influence in decision-making, such as their collaborative efforts and success in getting the poorly delivered lectures re-organised. Learners in this case have thus been strategically involved in the modelling or re-modelling of the course structure and culture by making themselves heard in the decision-making arena.

The structural constraints and enablements in the emergence of a learning community also manifested themselves in a more subtle way. Research conducted in conventional classroom settings with Chinese learners, such as that of Lee (1999) and Zhou et al, (2005), suggests that acquaintance and personal familiarity with peer students influence students' interactions with each other. This study shows that this applies equally to an e-learning environment. The development of warm and trustworthy interpersonal relationships among learners evidently helped the emergence of the learning community to a great extent. As one interviewed teacher expressed it, "I found they actually know each other very well, even the personal life and family issues." This familiarity with their peer students might have been gained from their informal chatting using the on-line instant messenger, social activities organised by the class committee, etc. 'Sharing meaning' has become motivation for learners to collaborate, as Crook (2000) similarly found in his study. Learners share information, from the course assignments to the latest gossip. Wenger argues that "what it takes for a community of practice to cohere enough to function can be very subtle and delicate…it is difficult to distinguish between the value of a specific piece of information and the value of the atmosphere of friendliness they create, or between bits of talk about work and the personal exchanges that are woven into their conversations" (1998:74). The social aspects of interaction are thus crucial to building up trustworthy relationships, and knowledge of other participants is a central part of these aspects. However, I argue that the preference for communicating with people whom they know should not be seen as an exclusive feature of Chinese learners, as some, such as Bond (1991), have assumed. Research has already found that in a computer conferencing setting people might be put off by the impression of a large lurking, anonymous audience, who could read their contributions (Grint, 1989). Similarly, Wegerif (1998) found in his study that the social dimension is important to the effectiveness of Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALNs) and needs to be

taken into account in the design of courses.

7.3 Learners' reflexivity and the usage of learning technology

Without making an assumption that technologies are *fundamentally* impacting on the ways in which students learn, the study looks at the learners' experience of technologies with an open-mind and examines how technologies have been perceived and actually used by learners in assisting their learning. Overall, the findings suggest that technology has played an important role in learners' learning experiences by supporting a range of learning activities: from searching for and processing information, preparing course assignment and exams, to communication with others. However, the extent of the importance attached to technology in facilitating their learning differs across different learners. Learners make reflexive decisions in choosing and using specific technologies by assessing the potential affordance of technology in meeting their learning needs.

Therefore, the major themes that have been identified in the e-learning literature - relevance and appropriation, control and choice – are also manifested in the findings of this study. For most learners, in both cases, technology is simply a means to an end. Learners choose a specific technology depending on their assessment of the extent of the affordance of that technology to meet their own needs. Therefore, it is seen that e-learning is appealing for these adult learners for its enhanced accessibility and flexibility, both of which are key aspects of their specific needs. In the JN case, the e-learning programme also provides opportunity to those who are denied access to a formal education due to territorial or financial barriers. This is particularly meaningful in China, with huge numbers of learners distributed over vast areas with a growing demand for lifelong learning.

As in studies by Conole et al (2006) and Creanor et al (2006), personalisation and a sense of control come across as key features in the use of technologies. When learning materials have included audio or video resources, they create new possibilities for understanding. For instance, the video clips were appreciated as presenting not only concepts but also rich contexts. More importantly, learners welcomed the greater sense of control and independence some electronic forms of materials allowed: students can repeat certain parts of the material which they felt difficult; CD/DVD-ROM allows them to transfer the audio recording of lectures into MP3 format so that they can download them into their own MP3 players. By contrast, where there was less learner control, more frustration was likely be evidenced. As indicated previously, learning materials cannot be accessed otherwise but online in the WeSU case, so learners were left with little choice. The frustrations were then compounded by some practical difficulties experienced, such as the unreliability of the internet connection and extra costs incurred in accessing the internet and printer. As Conole et al (2006) and Creanor et al (2006) also found in their studies, learners live in a complex and time-constrained life, therefore, efficient and flexible access to learning materials, experts and communities is increasingly important.

From the perspective of a socio-constructivist approach in e-learning design, the use of technology for transmitting knowledge is widely criticised (e.g. Salomon, 2000) and interpersonal interaction and dialogue have thus attracted most attention and appraisal. However, Thorpe and Godwin (2006) caution against interpretations of 'interaction' in an e-learning environment being narrowed down to interpersonal communication alone, with content interaction being assumed to be automatically less valuable than interpersonal interaction. The findings of this study support such an argument that it is important not to polarise these two different types of interactions. Both learner-learner and

learner-content interaction form important parts of learners' learning experiences. For many learners in both cases, learner-content interaction provides a major means to promote understanding of course content. In Confucian philosophy of education and contemporary educational practice in China , learner-content interaction has also been emphasized for its own sake as well as a basis for reflection and in-depth communication. It is thus important not to assume it to be a passive process, as during it learners can be actively involved in processing information and understanding the course content.

Moreover, Thorp and Godwin (2006) argue that audio-visual material can provide a form of experiential learning and students appreciate the enrichment of their study process through the use of multiple media. The findings suggest that the experiential learning has an important role to play in an e-learning environment. However, the most effective way of presenting material is not necessarily related to the idea of matching individual preferred learning styles (Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic – VAK) (Howard-Jones, 2008). Research has shown no benefit from having material presented in one's preferred learning style (e.g. Robinson et al., 1999). The elaboration of the potential affordances of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) entails a progressive acquisition of skills. To obtain these 'virtually incommunicable' skills learners must rely on their own practice. When taking the view that learning is the growth of a 'whole person', different opportunities for embarking on practice to develop different types of knowledge and skills are particularly desirable in the e-learning environment: opportunities for practicing basic computer and internet skills to make oneself familiar with the tools and functions in the course platform; opportunities for personal discovery and experiment. All of this should be accomplished through active doing and practicing, which are not excluded from social conversation, communication and reflection. Furthermore, as indicated in the previous chapter, skills perfection and making oneself familiar with the text is

often seen as the strategy employed by Chinese learners to initiate reflection

and hence deep understanding. Although this should by no means be seen as the only, fixed approach Chinese learners will adopt, it deserves attention when designing an e-learning course in the Chinese context. The findings revealed that the importance of the 'appropriate study skills' for effective learning on-line was recognized. However, 'appropriate study skills' could not be 'provided' by any means other than practice. These opportunities for practice should be embedded in the process of online socialisation, where the development of learners' skills, cognition, emotions, as well as social conversation and understanding is enabled.

The preference for personalisation and exerting control over the use of technologies is also reflected in learners' usage of communicative tools. The value of interpersonal interaction and the potential for using communicative tools to facilitate such interaction have been widely discussed from the course designers' or e-learning practitioners' perspectives in the literature. Learners' beliefs and experiences revealed in the study support some claims made in the literature, such as that interaction enhances feelings of connection and reduces the feeling of isolation; discussions with others help understand course content and facilitate deep learning. A wide range of technologies was employed by learners to support their interaction with teachers and peer learners. In agreement with Conole et al's (2006) research, learners were positive about those communication technologies they used, mainly synchronous in form, such as mobile phone and instant messenger. Again, immediacy, flexibility and low cost were seen as the major benefits that modern technologies could offer. For instance, e-mail communication seemed to provide an effective form of access to help and support, breaking down the barriers of time and place. On the other hand, this also reflects these adult learners' serious concern over the

limited time available for study, as identified in many studies (e.g. Howland & Moore, 2002; Manson, 2006). By contrast, feelings about the value of discussion forums promoted by course designers were much more ambivalent.

It has been claimed that in asynchronous communication, there are increased opportunities for students to reflect on their own opinions and those of others before contributing to an online discussion (McConnell, 2000; Mason, 1994; Hughes & Lewis, 2001). Findings in this study suggest, however, that the time-lag between their contributions can be problematic, particularly for these adult learners who are trying to study while earning a living at the same time. Therefore, the expanded time of a thread in an on-line discussion forum may increase 'opportunities to reflect', but equally increase the chances for the flow of the discussion to get lost. Going back to find the original threads was sometimes time-consuming and frustrating. When one lives in a fast-paced society with a huge amount of information emerging and changing so quickly, new information tends to replace the old in a short period and those questions that are not resolved 'immediately' tend to be forgotten and replaced by new ones. The finding aligns with that of Fullick (2004) who has found that the adolescent students in his study produced a higher number and quality of interactions in synchronous communication compared with what was achieved in asynchronous communication.

Negative experiences of computer conferencing, similar to those reported in other studies, were identified in the two cases to various extents: learners were unclear of how to present themselves on-line and contribute to the discussion (Brett, 2004; Ng, 2001) and unfamiliar with the social skills required for on-line collaboration (Rourke & Anderson, 2002); the broad-ranging and parallel 'conversations' extending over time, led the on-line discussion to become disorganised and confusing (Ruberg, Moore & Taylor, 1996); learners did not

find the discussion forum particularly useful because most discussions remain superficial (Beasley and Smyth (2004), Tolmie & Boyle (2000), Hughes & Daykin, 2002; Rourke & Anderson, 2002); the confusion over the rationale of the course design and the function of various resources in VLE prevented learners from integrating them better into their study (Hughes & Daykin, 2002; Ellis and Calvo, 2004; Moore & Aspen, 2004; Hughes and Lewis, 2001). The findings support the argument that forum-usage is heavily context dependent in terms of how it is integrated and used with a course (Conole, et al, 2006). As Thorp and Godwin (2006) claim, "interpersonal interaction is vulnerable to the contingencies of the constitution of particular student groups, tutor approach and ultimately the pedagogical expertise of the course provider, in setting up conference". Therefore, the very nature of asynchronous communication offers the potential for the negative impact of intensifying the tension between adult learners' studies and other commitments.

By contrast, and aligned with the findings of Conole et al (2006) and Creanor et al (2006), learners are creating their own social networks to support their learning, tailored to their particularly needs rather than being constrained within those provided by the courses. Learners have strong personal views on how technologies may or may not support their learning activities. They are most appreciative of the flexibility and accessibility learning technologies may offer. They welcome the technologies that keep them connected and allow them to communicate easily with each other in helping their learning, yet will not be constrained by those provided by the e-learning institutions. This complex relationship between learner and technologies is perfectly captured by the dualism of object and subject maintained by Archer.

As Conole et al (2006) claimed, when learners are immersed in a technologically richly-enhanced environment, they are in a better position to

make choices and exert greater control over technology adoption and usage. The social nature of technologies enhanced by 'Web 2.0'[6] (an umbrella term for a host of recent internet application such as social networking, wikis, blogging) has made it possible for learners to distribute and share information to a greater extent than ever before because these applications are built around the appropriation and sharing of content amongst communities of users (Selwyn, 2008). Web 2.0 enables a new form of social participation on the internet (Crook. 2008) and its popularity in the lives of learners has promoted enthusiasm amongst educators (Selwyn et al, 2008). Selwyn (2008) notes that there is an assumption of strong links between Web 2.0 and socio-cultural theories of learning: the importance of conversation, creation and collaboration in using Web 2.0 applications mirrors those features of effective learning advocated in socio-cultural learning theories. It is also suggested that Web2.0 can promote critical thinking in learners (Bugeja, 2008). These claims are, however, based more on speculation than sound empirical evidence. The findings from this research caution against the confusion between the potential affordances of technologies and how they can be used as teaching and learning tools. In reality, emerging research findings suggest that learners do not always use Web 2.0 in as straightforwardly educational ways as educationalists might expect (Selwyn, 2008). Therefore, it remains unclear how these technologies can or should be used to support teaching and learning in more structured, formal and accredited contexts. Evidence from the research also suggests that most young people actually do not want their lecturers or tutors to use social networking sites for teaching in formal study and using these sites in education is more effective when the students set them up themselves (Mori, 2008). This evidence, together with the findings from this study, reinforces the theme identified in learners' preferences in using technologies: ownership and a sense of control. When learners' personally-owned communicative technologies are

---

6 The origins of the web 2.0 definition are usually traced back to authors such as Tim O'Reilly (2005) and Clay Shirky (2003).

hosted, sanctioned or mandated by an institution, the nature and the meaning of the communication and interaction enabled might as a consequence be changed.

7.4 'Ren' (trustworthy human relationship) in e-learning environments

As discussed in the previous chapter, the central concept in Confucian philosophy - 'Ren' (benevolence) represents balanced and harmonised human relationships and trust is the critical ingredient of all dependent social interactions in order to achieve this balanced and harmonised human relationship. In chapter 2, 'Ren' was seen as being manifested in Chinese educational tradition and practice: learning is a cooperative process between teacher and student; teaching and learning go hand in hand to contribute to each other; there is a strong sense of trust and responsibility within the teacher-student relationship; students' spontaneous collaborations outside the classroom, small group work involving collaboration and cooperation seemed to be a 'natural' way to structure learning among ethnic Chinese learners. The findings in this study have also indicated the significance of human relationships in an e-learning environment influencing learners' learning experiences, in either positive or negative ways. The most enjoyable experiences reported in both cases were the warm and trustworthy relationships developed with peer learners. The following discussion will examine whether 'Ren' has been achieved in teacher-student relationships in the e-learning courses and how that has influenced learners' experiences.

7.4.1 Teacher's role and learners' autonomy

Given the moral nature of education in Chinese tradition, a teacher is often seen as a moral model and example for students to follow. Apart from that,

teachers are expected to provide the proper environment for learners to develop, give instruction when it is needed, and adjust the learning content according to learners' needs. Learners' expectations of the teacher's role found in the study fell into similar categories within this ideological tradition: the emphasis was given to providing learning resources and consultancy, helping students solve problems and develop relevant learning skills, invoke students' thinking by posing questions or even exploring new knowledge together with students. However, the findings also revealed that there was a gap between learners' expectations of the teacher's role and responsibility and their actual learning experiences in both cases.

In the WeSU case, e-tutors realised the importance of the support to be given to the learners, particularly at the early stage of the programme. A few of the e-tutors tried to respond to everything that the participants posted on the discussion forum at first. At the same time, with the intention of acting as a facilitator rather than taking a didactic role, they were also very concerned that their presence would probably interfere with the development of discussion between the participants by reinforcing their assumptions that the tutor has the 'right' answer. This concern reflects those opinions expressed in the literature that the presence of the teacher as an authority figure could inhibit the free exchange of ideas (Amerstrong et al, 2001, Kremer & McGuinness, 1998). Thus some e-tutors felt 'at pain to ensure the presence on Moodle as a form of encouragement and academic support' (WeSU –UK eTutor Report II). However, learners' experiences support another side of the argument, that students welcome greater tutor engagement (Light et al, 2000) and having a teacher's active presence in the online discussions seems to be a critical issue (McAlpine et al, 2004; Rimmershaw, 1999). In agreement with the findings of Jones et al (2004) and Thomas et al (2004), the learners in this study felt that the prompt replies and feedback given by tutors were encouraging and motivating.

However, there was also evidence that learners in this case still do not feel secure enough to enter the strange 'online forums' and there was strong unfulfilled desire for reassurance, which could have been offered by e-tutors. As in Howland and Moore's (2002) study, the lack of guidance through verbal feedback from an instructor, together with the language barrier, left students with less confidence in interpreting the course demands and engaging with the on-line discussion. Many researchers would agree that positive learning experience on CMC often relates to learners' awareness of the purpose of the discussion forums and the rationale of the course design, as well as their having the necessary skills of communicating on-line (e.g. Moore and Aspen, 2004; Motteram and Forrester, 2005). The findings in this study reinforced this position. However, rather than expecting learners to come to the course with these understandings and skills already developed, there should be room in the course design for helping and supporting learners to achieve them. E-tutors certainly have a more active role to play in facilitating participants to 'find out' the course demands and the functions of various resources employed in VLE.

By contrast, teachers in the JN case see themselves as guides and directors to introduce students into a new field of study. In their on-line lectures or audio/video lectures recorded pre-hand, it was the teachers' job to select some basic, well-received fundamental knowledge in the field as the introductory guide for students' learning. However, arguably, teachers might not act in as much of a pure authority role as it appears. Findings indicate that some well designed and delivered lectures were thought-stimulating and inspiring. This fulfils learners' expectations of teachers to lead them gently towards new understandings that they could otherwise find difficult, rather than being absolutely independent. There was no evidence, however, that teachers were treated as 'authority' figures in doing this. In contrast, the findings revealed that with clear expectations students can be very critical of their teachers. They

showed general confidence in the teacher's knowledge of the subject whilst remaining with doubts and challenges over the effectiveness of the teaching methods used. When there were poorly delivered lectures, learners took the initiative to bring about change. However, the absence of continuous and sufficient interaction with teachers in the case was also widely criticised.

The contrast in teachers' beliefs about their role in the teaching and learning process in the two cases reflects the different underpinning pedagogical approaches in design, supporting the findings of the SOLE project (Timmis et al., 2004). It also echoes the idea that there exist different learning structure preferences between Eastern and Western countries, as discussed earlier. Chinese teachers and learners seem to attach greater importance to knowing the basics in order to facilitate their in-depth understanding, which might deserve the course designers' attention, but there was no evidence showing that teachers perform as 'authorities' in doing this. Moreover, a note of caution is sounded in the findings that transforming the teacher's role into a more facilitative one in an e-learning environment should not simply be seen as a matter of decreasing the level of guidance and support given. The provision of opportunities for interaction with tutors is crucial for the development of learners' confidence in tackling the learning tasks in an e-learning environment.

The discussion of the teacher's role has very often related to the issue of learners' autonomy. It has been claimed that autonomous learners are those who have good knowledge of themselves as learners, the learning settings, subjects to be learnt and learning process. It is a constructed capacity rather than simply freedom of action (McGrath et al, 2007). Findings in the study support such a claim. In the WeSU case, a lack of understanding of the course demands, the rationale of the course design, limited number of participants, poorly functioning communicative tools as well as language barriers and the

short duration of the pilot course, have inhibited participants from gaining a good knowledge of their roles as learners in this particular course, to gain understanding of their learning context, the subject to be learnt and learning process. By contrast, although not without its problems in the course design, clearly defined learning objectives, assessment methods and guided instruction in the on-line lectures in the JN case helped learners to organize their learning in more effective way. The notion of 'learner autonomy' is also often aligned with the educational potential brought by new technologies, such as Web 2.0, which is suggesting a less directive role for the teacher (Selwyn, et al, 2008). As Leadbetter comments, the imperative of Web 2.0 based educational provision requires us to "see learning as something more like a computer game, something that is done peer-to-peer, without a traditional teacher" (2008:26). The findings in this study would suggest caution against adopting such an over-simplified aspiration. In contrast, I would agree with the observation made by Selwyn et al (2008) that teachers should play a crucial role in guiding learners to make informed decisions, build up confidence and capacity for reasoning and understanding in an information abundant internet arena. In their article, Hendler et al (2008) expressed a similar concern:

…a crucial aspect of human interaction with information is our ability to represent and reason over such attributes as trustworthiness, reliability, and tacit expectations about the use of information, as well as about privacy, copyright, and other legal rules

(Hendler et al, 2008).

7.4.2 Relationship between teacher & student

Teacher-student interaction is influenced by the norms of behaviour, values, and beliefs that exist in that culture (Salili, 2001). As noted in the previous chapter, traditionally, Chinese teachers bear a moral responsibility of caring for their students. The relationship between teacher and student is marked by a

sense of responsibility on both sides: Chinese students show their respects to teachers in formal classroom settings and also enjoy a warm and informal relationship with their teachers after the class. Despite the relatively less frequent interaction in the classroom, there is very often much teacher-student interaction outside the classroom, such as informal discussions and other collective activities, in particularly in school education. It may be anticipated that in an e-learning environment, it will be more difficult for teachers to deliver this sense of care and responsibility.

Unfortunately, findings indicate that a warm and close relationship between teacher and student failed to be achieved in both cases. It has been argued that the changing role of teacher from transmitter to facilitator in the e-learning environment design would be accompanied by a changing status in power relationships (Jones and Steeples, 2002; Goodyear, 2001). E-tutors were supposed to be in a more 'equal' and 'peer-like' position in the WeSU case. However, only a few learners had expressed the feeling that was in fact the case. In this case, the findings contradict those of McConnel (1999): the changing power relationships did *not* become real to all the participants with the changing pedagogical approach in course design. I would argue that it is the development of trusting human relationships that will bring changes to the power relationship, and not just a change in underpinning pedagogical approach. And this balanced human relationship is built upon trusting interpersonal interactions. Similar to those psychological barriers identified in the literature, the findings suggest that it is more difficult to achieve such trusting interpersonal interaction though computer conferencing communication. For instance, the lack of 'social presence' produces disturbance of the affective interaction (Rourke & Anderson, 2002) and limited social presence is unable to provide 'social context cues' and information that catalyse the process of getting to know people (Grint, 1989; Bird, 2004; Goodyear, 2006). Therefore, the

aspiration for communication on a one-to-one basis was evidenced but not encouraged by course designers and e-tutors. Moreover, it has been an effective means of interaction between teacher and student in Chinese educational practice because it focuses not only on knowledge or course content but also on emotional exchange. While e-tutors in the WeSU case were concerned that their presence and one-to-one communication would inhibit the development of discussion, it is equally important to be aware of the possible loss of opportunities to gain the trust of the learners. Jarvis (2004) makes the point, with which I concur, that in relation to learning the person is more important than correct knowledge. The findings suggest that the teachers' interest in the students and commitment to teaching were sensitively felt by learners and affected their attitude to learning. Since both teachers and students in the case believed that human contact cannot be replaced by a machine or impersonal technology, such contact neither needs to be nor should be replaced .

Similarly, in the JN case, the one-way teaching process left learners' desire to know their teachers unfulfilled and the close teacher/student relationship underdeveloped. Having said that, experiences of on-line/video lectures in the JN case were not judged entirely negatively by learners, who welcomed the opportunity to view the 'real' teachers, as well as being provided with a sense of continuity with their previous classroom learning experiences. This provides evidence in support of Thorp and Godwin's (2006) argument that when there is no possibility of communication in real time, the voice and image of a person creates a 'presence' that can bring a more human and personal 'feel' to the learning. Interestingly, by contrast with the WeSU case, the use of an on-line discussion forum brought in the issue of changing power relationships, despite the absence of a collaborative approach in the design. The event in which the learners' discussion was deleted by a TA illustrates the tension between the

traditional role of the teacher and the social settings of an online environment. The open and unpredictable creation of meaning through learners' spontaneous collaboration was felt by the TA to threaten his status. Learners' debates with the TA and their initiatives in solving the problem provide evidence that the formal and hierarchical relationship between teacher and Chinese learners is a result of situational constraint and socialisation rather than cultural predisposition. It also suggests that for on-line interaction between teacher and student to be effective, the induction and socialisation should also include e-tutors. Most of the teachers and TAs interviewed in the JN case were very unfamiliar with various on-line communicative tools in teaching and learning. It is therefore hardly surprising that they could not make effective use of those tools available to facilitate students' learning. Therefore, as Monteith and Smith (2001) have suggested, staff development needs to go beyond practical, soft-ware-based workshops and revisit theories of encouraging contribution and discussion in the light of the new medium.

Moreover, the findings suggest that developing a trusting human relationship also entails mutual understanding, which was not achieved well between teachers and learners in both cases. The origins of the gap were found to be in the diverse understandings held by the course designers, teachers and learners about learners' needs, and their preferences of learning strategy and technology usage. In particular, in the WeSU case, rather than examining the structural constraints in the course design and other factors in the e-learning settings, learners were harshly judged to 'lack autonomy' because "the traditional ways of Chinese pedagogic approaches…are typical teacher-driven and teacher-centred" (eTutor report – WeSU, I). This stereotyping of the learners and misunderstanding of their learning behaviours inhibited the giving of truly valuable support, thus impeding the building of a trusting relationship between tutors and learners in the e-learning environment. In the JN case, the

limited interaction between teacher and learners also prevented such mutual understanding from developing. In addition to this, teachers' and TAs' commitment to teaching and their attitudes towards learners were shown to be crucial factors for achieving mutual understanding.

7.5 Summary and recommendations

The overarching research question of the study is:

What are the Chinese adult learners' learning experiences like in two e-learning courses? How do these experiences reflect the learners' personal power acting upon the constraints and enablement from their e-learning settings as well as their social and cultural context?

To answer this central question it is first divided into four sub-questions as follows:

1. What are the learners' self-defined motivation, intention and concerns of coming to study in two e-learning courses? How do they affect learners' learning experience as a whole?

Although various reasons were found for these Chinese adult learners taking part in the two e-learning courses, career relevance and personal development are identified as two major concerns and motivations. The strong aspirations for job enhancement and improved prospects lead the concern over the credibility of the qualification. However, such aspirations do not exclude an interest in subject knowledge itself and a concern over the quality of the education the course delivered. These motivations and concerns are not mutually contradictory as suggested by the intrinsic/extrinsic motivations categories of Western academic tradition. Instead, they reflect the tradition of the harmonious co-existence of one's internal establishment and external performance as emphasised in Chinese philosophy of education, as well as the current social

and economic environment in China. The broad meaning of personal development found in the Chinese context urges an understanding of learning as lifelong personal growth with continuously transforming life experiences. Learning is thus a dynamic, changing, growing process in which the learner is an active organism with various potentialities capable of being developed. Such an understanding reflects both John Dewey's concept of education as growth and of education as a two-way process of creation and recreation in Confucian philosophy, as discussed in Chapter 2.

This feature of learning is reflected in this study, where e-learning is found to be an emotionally charged dynamic and changing process. Learners' motivation and commitment to learn are not fixed but undergo revision through learners' reflexivity in the light of their ongoing experience. Therefore, arguably, a fixed, rigid and over-structured e-learning design might inhibit learning as a dynamic process of growth. Because learning is an inseparable part of wider life experience, learners must strike a balance among their different commitments. Similarly, embedded in the wider social and cultural context, e-learning is constructed in both the physical and virtual environments. The tension between learning and other commitments is more acute for adult e-learners. I would argue that to help learners fit their e-learning experiences into their whole life experiences, the gap between the virtual and the real world should be minimised rather than being maximised in the design. This finding might challenge the confident portrayal of virtual worlds, such as Second Life, by some educationalists in terms of imminent transformation of the learning and teaching process. Enthusiasts embrace these applications not simply as a sort of gaming, but another sort of living (Selwyn et al, 2008). However, being human one cannot only live in a virtual reality but in real natural, practical and social settings as Archer (2000a) has maintained. Thus, the sophistication of the virtual world might lead to great distractions and obstructions to learners.

Learners' motivation, intention and concerns do not allow us comfortably to categorise them into 'active learners' or 'passive learners'. The extent of learners' commitment to learn is a result of their reflexive decision-making by negotiating and accommodating their different concerns from different aspects of their reality. For instance, the strong aspiration for career relevance drives learners to value the practical application of course content. To become a better person means not only enriching one's knowledge but developing well-rounded skills. Rich course content with authentic learning tasks is desirable and opportunities to develop different skills are appreciated in e-learning settings. Therefore, the extent to which a course is able to fulfil both the learners' urgent needs and their ultimate concerns forms the basis of their decision making on how much effort they are prepared to put into the course study. It is thus fundamental to identify learners' needs for an e-learning implementation to be effective.

2. What are the pedagogical approaches and other aspects of learning design employed in the two e-learning courses? What are learners' reactions to them and how do they influenced their learning? And what are the issues from the course delivery that can be identified as affecting learners' learning experiences?

The pedagogical approaches employed, either explicitly or implicitly, in the course design in these two e-learning courses are very different from each other. Inspired by the social constructivist approach, the Sino-UK joint designed course is process-focused, placing much emphasis on online communication and collaboration. Although its underpinning pedagogical approach is more implicit, the course purely designed by the local Chinese institution is a content-focused e-learning design and learners were expected to learn

individually with the aid of different forms of learning materials and limited teacher assistance from on-line forums. The two programme designs reflect different e-learning strategies: one focuses on using technology as an individualized, instructional tool and the other as a more discursive and communicative medium (Conole, Smith and Whilte, 2007).

Different pedagogical approaches may also reflect different understandings of learning from the course designers' perspectives. As a theory for learning technology design in the West, the social constructivist approach reflects the overt recognition of the significant role of context in influencing the learning process. However, caution should be taken not to overvalue social conversation and communication above other kinds of practice, given the full account of our relations to reality as captured in Archer's ontological framework. Practice is pivotal to all forms of knowledge. The research findings support such an argument and suggest that not only are social conversation and communication desirable in an e-learning environment but so also are the opportunities to embark on practice for different purposes, including developing basic computer and internet skills, interactions with course content and materials, personal experiment and discovery. Although it is difficult to isolate and identify the specific influence of a single factor, these Chinese adult e-learners' experiences indicate that their learning structure and organisation preferences show influences from their cultural tradition and past learning experiences. For instance, they are probably more comfortable in 'knowing the basics' or 'being familiar with the text' before they confidently contribute to any in-depth discussion or criticism. Therefore, this deserves some additional thought when computer conferencing is going to be employed in the course as a major means of communication and collaboration. At least, it might be seen as inappropriate to expect Chinese learners to 'jump into' the discussion right from the beginning of the course, since this might be seen as a 'new' and 'alien' way of learning for

them. Indeed, learners cannot communicate if they do not have anything to communicate about, neither can they reflect if they do not have anything to reflect on. Content on the one hand, and interpersonal communication and interaction on the other should not be seen as mutually exclusive options. As the study shows, well-designed learner-content interaction can be an effective (but not the sole) means to learn.

Having said that, the differences between different cultural traditions might not be as striking as they sound. The findings suggest that there are actually many common features in the understanding of learning between Chinese teachers and students and some of those documented in the West; for instance, deep understanding and application of knowledge is desirable, and learning skills is valued over content. Arguably, the adoption of a particular approach is also heavily influenced by inescapable pragmatic issues for e-learning implementation in both institutional and wider contexts, such as national policy, resources, costs, tutor/student ratio, student support, availability and levels of technical and management support. The e-learning design and implementation in the JN case reflect some of these problems in the current development of e-learning in China, such as a lack of teaching resources and management experience and a tension between cost-effectiveness and quality assurance. As a consequence of the little attention paid to the teaching and learning process and how technology could be used to support this process, the course is didactic and content-focused, technologies have been adopted mainly for presenting and delivering learning material and information, leaving the function of communication and interaction undeveloped in the course provision. The teacher/student ratio in the e-learning programme has a direct influence on the teaching method adopted and the support a teacher can provide to his/her students. It is important to note, however, that a tension may exist between the value of exploiting the new possibilities of ICT applied to learning and the need,

identified in this research, to avoid too radical a discontinuity with the learners' previous experiences that may lead to a sense of disorientation and confusion.

The forming of a learning community is a socialisation process for a group of individual learners, during which they express their interests and organise their strategic pursuit of their common target. To facilitate such a socialization process, there should be resources available, both ideational and material, in the e-learning settings. For instance, an e-learning course can be used as a platform where learners can engage with those who have similar interests to themselves. As has been found in classroom settings, spontaneous collaboration and small group work involving collaboration and cooperation seemed to a natural way to structure learning among ethnic Chinese learners. At least, it is seen as inappropriate to attribute an unsatisfactory implementation of a collaborative course design as due to a default 'learners' predisposition'. When there are teaching innovations that are fresh to learners, the right question to ask might be what kind of extra support should be given to them. Moreover, the development of trusting human relationships is a key to the emergence of the learning community because relationships are identified in this study as a driving force in the learning process. Technologies expand the availability of such relationships across the traditional boundaries of time and space. At the same time, they sets up barriers to be overcome by removing more direct human contacts during the interactions. Therefore, to bring moral support into the e-learning environment should be seen as a crucial issue.

Chinese learners' experiences in responding to the contrasting course designs and deliveries in the two cases suggest that the structural factors exert their influence through the mediation of learners' personal power - reflexivity. As Archer (2000a, 2000b) has put it, the causal power of structural and social properties has to be activated by agents through social action and therefore,

the gap between the course design and arrangement and learners' reactions illustrates the difference between the *existence* of structural and cultural properties and the subjects' *responses* to them. By exerting their personal power in interacting with the structural properties from the e-learning setting, learners bring change and transformation to the structure over time.

3. How are technologies perceived and actually used by learners in assisting their learning?

The most promising attraction of e-learning for adult learners is its enhanced accessibility and flexibility, which allows them to combine their study with work. This is reflected in the e-learning strategy adopted as national policy in China, that the development of e-learning has become a national strategy for providing lifelong education primarily for its convenience and low cost. With the expansion of demand for higher education in China, e-learning is seen as a means to "allow students to have access to a school's faculty and teaching resources and to receive higher education but also promotes reform of the higher education system" (Kang and Song, 2007). At the same time, distance education in China has long been regarded as being peripheral in status and second class in quality (Gu, 2006). Learners' concerns over the quality of teaching and learning in these two courses reflect this perception. Moreover, because formal education is seen as the model for distance education in China, learners' expectations of the teaching methods and interactions with teachers and other students are also heavily influenced by their past classroom learning experiences.

The advantages of technologies can be used both for presenting and delivering information in more effective ways and enhancing interpersonal communication and interaction. Learner-content interaction is a valuable means to promote

learner understanding of course materials as well as interpersonal interaction, and as such deserves an equal amount of consideration with the interpersonal interactions in course design. Given that time is a central concern for these adult e-learners trying to balance their complex lives, it must equally become a crucial consideration in choosing specific communication technologies. The desire for immediacy, flexibility and accessibility lead to synchronous communication technologies being seen as a more attractive option than asynchronous ones. In the same spirit, the sophistication of any particular technology used might also increase the opportunity of turning-off learners. For adult learners the amount of time needed in online discussion forums can easily be seen as an 'extra demand' for them. Apart from this, the lack of social presence in computer conferencing communication constitutes a major psychological barrier for many learners against engaging with others, because it leads to a deficit of information for understanding as well as affective disturbance. By contrast, a wide range of synchronous communicative tools, not necessarily provided by the courses, have been used to facilitate connection and interaction with peer learners and teachers. Learners' daily used technologies, such as mobile phone, instant messenger, e-mails, have played important roles in facilitating their learning process. The social network created becomes an important venue for peer communication and collaboration.

Therefore, although technologies were designed to be used for different purposes in the two courses, learners' actual use of technologies can, however, 'escape' from the designers' intention. It is based on learners' reflexive decisions: what to use and how to use it, by weighing up the extent to which technologies meet their own needs and fit into their own situation. The findings supply evidence to Archer's (2000a) assertion that the objective properties of an artefact are independent to its maker and designer. Similar to that of learners,

the decisions made by designers of the adoption of any technology in the course design are also constrained by the structural properties in the situation where they are, such as the cost-effectiveness, the availability and adaptability of technology, However, such consideration does not always match learners' concerns over using technologies, such as the demand of time and immediate correspondence. The gap, therefore, is found between designers' intention and learners' experiences in using technology.

As a tool to facilitate their learning, learners like to exert control in adapting technologies to meet their own learning needs. Multiple forms of presentation of learning material enhanced accessibility and enriched learners' learning experiences as a whole. The elaboration of any affordance of technologies, however, is achieved through learners' active doing and practices. A well-designed e-learning environment is thus one that provides choices of different learning routes and technologies available as well as different opportunities for practice to develop different types of knowledge and skills.

4.   What are the teachers' roles in learners' expectations and actual experiences in the two e-learning courses? How does that influence learners' learning?

Teachers are expected to give clear guidance, on-time feedback and continuous support for learners' learning. These expectations are partly influenced by learners' past learning experiences and beliefs embedded in their socio-cultural background. Prompt replies to their questions and feedback by teachers can be encouraging and motivating, and their guidance given in a new area of learning is seen as essential. Apart from this, e-tutors have an important role to play in interpreting and communicating the course demands and the rationale behind the course design to learners. Teachers' continuous interaction

and communication with learners is crucial for helping them exercise their reflexivity and make informed decisions in e-learning settings.

The contrast between the two cases in teachers' beliefs about their role reflects the different underpinning pedagogical approaches in their designs as well as different preferences in relation to learning structure between Eastern and Western traditions. The desire to transform the teacher's role into a more facilitative one in an e-learning environment must not simply be taken as a matter of decreasing the level of guidance and support given. At the same time, however, teachers' presence should not be seen as that of an 'authority figure', but as enhancing the 'human dimension' in an e-learning environment in which learners would feel safer to join.

The strong sense of responsibility and personal care marked in teacher-student relationships in Chinese cultural and educational tradition is difficult to achieve in an e-learning environment where the opportunities for informal, social interaction are reduced. Any change in the balance of power relationships between teacher and learner does not come automatically as a result of adopting a new pedagogical approach in e-learning design but depends on trusting human relationship being established. This concept of 'Ren' in Chinese philosophical tradition thus has significant meaning in an e-learning environment. The building up of 'Ren' in e-learning settings calls for effective interpersonal interactions, with the aid of communication technologies. 'Social presence' in communication is perceived as important to shorten the inter-personal distance and achieve mutual understanding. Therefore, human contact cannot, and should not be replaced by contact with a machine. Moreover, a trusting relationship can only be achieved in the absence of prejudice and stereotyping but with an understanding of the possible different preferences in learning approaches between different cultures and social

contexts.

Recommendations

The following recommendations can be drawn from the study for the development and implementation of further e-learning programmes in China and in general. For any such programme it is important to:

- Understand learners' needs, concerns and available learning resources

- Provide rich content with easy access and multiple forms of presentation

- Support different types of interactions (learner-content; learner-learner; learner-teacher)

- Provide authentic learning tasks with close links to learners' life/working experiences

- Ensure transparent course design with clearly stated learning objectives, structures and assessment methods

- Place e-learning in learners' day-to-day reality, minimising the gap between the virtual learning environment and the real world

- Maintain human contacts and social presence

- Enable flexible learning pathways and empower learners' control over the learning process

- Build up moral and trusting relationship in e-learning environments

- Provide sufficient support and guidance throughout the learning process

- Maintain continuing dialogue and interaction between teachers/e-tutors and learners

- Ensure staff development beyond technical/practical issues (in China, TA training is a key and imperative task for e-learning development)

- Support knowledge application and theory-practice transfer

- Provide opportunities for practice of all round skills and knowledge (basic computer/on-line skills, on-line socialising skills and communication skills)

- Keep technology easy to use and adaptable, relevant and appropriate; provide necessary learning tools and communicative tools and sufficient guidance on their use

- Facilitate experience sharing and reflexive engagement

- Facilitate more synchronous communication and immediate feedback on the learning process

- Be sensitive to different social and cultural contexts but avoid the pitfalls of 'stereotyping' and cultural-determinism

- Enhance management of learning centres as the main places for contacts between learners and e-learning institutions in China

Implications and further research：

This study set out to look at Chinese adult e-learners' learning experiences in two e-learning programmes conducted in China and how these experiences have reflected learners' personal power – reflexivity - in interacting with their socio-cultural contexts as well as the e-learning settings. Margaret Archer's critical realist approach to reflexivity as a mediating influence in the relationship between structure and agency has provided an interpretive framework for this research and proved to be sound.

Firstly, this theoretical framework enables structural influences at different levels to be examined, mainly through the lenses of the learners, to understand how and to what extent individual learners are using their personal power – reflexivity - to make their way through the e-world and to mediate the bi-directional interactions that take place between the e-learning environment and themselves. The study is thus significant in terms of providing a powerful

research approach to the analysis of contextual influence on learning in e-learning. The employment of such an explanatory framework is a productive attempt to apply a social theory into a context (e-learning) where, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been used before. The approach invites us to explore the ways in which learners engage with the world as through their very existence as human beings, which may, or may not constitute an act of (e-)learning, but necessarily links to the learning experiences. It thus cautions against e-learning design being solely focused on any self-contained virtual learning environments without exploring the potentials and influences of emerging technologies embedded in the real world of the learners; that is, to avoid any separation of the virtual world from these real worlds. This perspective has profound implications for future research on and practice of the design affordance of emerging technologies in education, such as 3D animated virtual worlds. Therefore, I envisage that for e-learning research, there will be much more to gain from the perspective of social theories of learning and, arguably, this study contributes to our understanding in this approach as well as offered fertile ground for future research on contextual influences on learning in general.

Secondly, the study enhances our understanding of e-learning phenomena among a specific cultural group while avoiding 'stereotyping' and 'cultural-determinism' by examining the effects of individual learners' personal power in interacting with their wider contexts. The study suggests that cultural influences on learning deserve serious attention when designing an e-learning course. At the same time, learners were evidently exercising high levels of reflexivity as the basis for their decision making in almost every aspect of their learning, such as their commitment to learn, the form of learning community, the use of learning technologies, and adapting to a new learning environment. The diversity of learning experiences displayed by these Chinese adult e-learners in

the study indicates the important role of learners' reflexivity in mediating the different levels of structural influence. In a novel learning environment, such as an e-learning environment for many learners, it might be expected that learners will exhibit higher levels of reflexivity in navigating themselves around the e-world. It is thus necessary for e-learning course designers and tutors to help learners make informed decisions by providing sufficient and appropriate guidance and resources.

Moreover, the study found that it is useful not to conduct the discussion around polarised distinctions – the East versus the West - so that the inter-cultural contrast is not exaggerated. Indeed, comparisons with research findings from elsewhere reveal much commonality across cultural boundaries in both the understanding of learning and educational practice. Rather than focusing on the 'inherent characteristics' of Chinese learners, the study has benefited from documenting the actual teaching and learning settings, e-learning designs and implementation as well as placing the learners' voices centre-stage. Any discrete learning preferences or behaviours can only be understood properly by locating them within the larger social and cultural system in which the learning is conducted.

Overall, the lesson is learnt from the study that when learning technology is advocated with enthusiasm for its educational potential, there is a need for caution over the transferability of good practice across different contexts. The findings have profound implications for e-learning policy makers, course designers and other e-learning practitioners in the Chinese context, and for enhancing our understanding of structural and cultural influence on e-learning in general. In the same spirit, caution must be exercised in suggesting the transferability of the more detailed findings of this study, which emerge from and belong to a very specific set of cultural and historical moments. Arguably, such

exercise of caution is even more important in the contexts of rapid change that characterise the contemporary world in general and China in particular.

One set of potential influences on learners' e-learning experiences that is attractive for further research is various aspects of the learners' backgrounds, such as social class and gender. A considerable volume of research has revealed the impact of such factors on engagement with and success in more conventional classroom-based education but this has yet to be extended to embrace e-learning environments, beyond basic issues of access to the technology. In the Chinese context, this is likely to be a very interesting and potentially rewarding area of study, given the dynamic nature of society, increasing levels of socio-economic differentiation and even the nascent formation of new and distinctive socio-economic groupings and strata.

Reflexivity has a central role in helping people make informed decisions and navigate their way through the contemporary world, which is characterized by rapid and wide-ranging change, a plethora of manufactured risks and high levels of uncertainty and ambivalence. In the field of education, how education would meet the challenges brought by the rise of fast-changing new technologies in the current era and enable students to make more informed decisions is also a central issue. Archer's approach to reflexivity employed in this study, arguably, places human learning, as conceptualized by both Confucius and Dewey, at the heart of the interaction between structure and agency

References

Adelman, C., Kemmis, S. & Jenkins, D. (1980) Rethinking case study: notes from the second Cambridge conference. In H, Simon (ed.) *Towards a Science of the Singular: essays about case study in educational research and evaluation.* Norwich: Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia

Allan, B.(2004) E-learners' Experience of Time, *Networked Learning Conference 2004: a research-based conference on e-learning in higher education and lifelong learning*, Lancaster University, England, UK

Anderson, T., Rourke,L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conference context, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5 (2), 1-17

Anganostopoulo, K. (2002) *Designing to Learn and Learning to Design: an overview of instructional design models*. York: LTSN Generic Centre. Available from: http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=17113, [30/09/2006]

Atack, L. & Rankin, J. (2002) A descriptive study of registered nurses' experiences with web-based learning, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 40 (4), 457-465.

Atan, H. et. al. (2004) Characteristics of the web-based learning environment in distance education: students' perceptions of their learning needs, *Educational Media International*, 41 (2), 103-110

Atman, K.S. (1988) Psychological type elements and goal accomplishment style: implications for distance education, *American Journal of Distance Education*, 2 (3), 36-44

Archer, M.(1995) *Realist Social Theory: The morphogenetic approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Archer, M. (1996) *Culture and Agency: The place of culture in social theory,* (Revised edition), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Archer, M. (1998) Introduction: Realism in the social science, in M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, R. Collier, T. Lawson, and A. Norrie (Ed) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, Routledge: London and New York

Archer, M. (2000a) Being Human: The problem of human agency, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Archer, M. (2000b) For structure: its reality, properties and powers: a reply to Anthony King, *The Sociological Review*, 48 (3) 464-472

Archer, M. (2003) Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Archer, M. (2007) *Making Our Way through the World: Human reflexivity and social mobility*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Armstrong, J. Clark, R. and Varey, J. (2001) Enhancing the capacity of online discussions to support student learning, in Rust, C. (2001) (ed) *Improving Student Learning Using Learning Technology, Proceedings of the 2001 9th International Symposium,* The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.

Baptista-Nunes, M. & McPherson, M. (2002) No lectures on campus: can eLearning provide a better learning experience? Available online: http://ittf.ieee.org/icalt2002/proceedings/t1404_icalt124_End.pdf

Bannister, P. & Parr. S. (2001) Student experience: novices, surfers, learners, in Rust, C. (2001) *Improving Student Learning Using Learning Technology, Proceedings of the 2001 9th International Symposium*, The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beasley, N. and Smyth, K. (2004) Expected and actual student use of an online learning environment: a critical analysis, Electronic Journal of e-learning, 2 (1), 43-50

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage

Beetham, H. (2005) What is learning and how do we learn? Instruction to three types of learning theory, In Beetham, H. and Robert, G. (eds) *Introduction to Learning Theory and Design for Learning*, Oxford: ALT

Beetham, H. (2008) Learners' Experiences of e-Learning: Research from the UK', symposium for Networked Learning Conference2008, available online: https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/Phase+2+outputs

Benney, Mark and Hughes, Everett C (1984) 'Of Sociology and the Interview'. In

Martin Bulmer (Ed.) *Sociological Research Methods: an introduction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Bell, J. (1987) *Doing Your Research Project – A guide for first-time researchers in education and social science* (2nd Edition), Open University Press, Buckingham. Philadephia

Bhaskar, R. (1989) *Reclaiming Reality: a critical introduction to contemporary philosophy*, Verso: London and New York

Bhaskar, R.(1998) General introduction, in M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, R. Collier, T. Lawson, and A. Norrie (Ed) *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, Routledge: London and New York

Biggs, J. (1987) *Student Approaches to Learning and Studying*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Biggs, J.B. (1990) Effects of language medium of instruction on approaches to learning. *Educational Research Journal (Hong Kong)*, 4, 18-28.

Biggs, J.B. (1991) Approaches to learning in secondary and tertiary students in Hong Kong: some comparative studies. *Education Research Journal,* 6, 27-39.

Biggs, J.B. (1994). What are effective schools? Lessons from East and West. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 21, 19-39.

Biggs, J.B. (1996) Western Misperceptions of the Confucian-Heritage Learning Culture, in Watkins, D. A. and Biggs, J.B. (eds) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Biggs, J. and Watkins, D. (1996) The Chinese Learn in Retrospect, , in Watkins, D. A. and Biggs, J.B. (eds) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Bird, C. (2004) Sinking in a C-M sea: a graduate student's experience of learning through asynchronous computer-mediated communication, *Reflective Practice*, 5 (2), 253-263

Bond, M. H. (1986) *The Psychology of the Chinese People*, Oxford University Press, New York

Bond, M.H. (1991) *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights from Psychology.* Oxford

University Press, Hong Kong.

Brace-Govan, J., & Clulow, V. (2000) Varying expectations of online students and the implications for the teachers: findings from a journal study, *Distance Education*, 21 (1), pp.118-135

Brett, C (2004) Off-line contributing to online engagement, *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 13 (1), 83-95.

Brookfield, S. D. (1986) *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning: a comprehensive analysis of principles and effective practices*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Brookfield S D (1995), *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher,* San Francisco, CA, Jossey Bass

Brookfield, S. D. and Preskill, S. (1999) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and techniques for university teachers.* London: Open University Press/Society for Research into Higher Education.

Brundage, D. H. and Mackeracher, D. (1980) *Adult Learning Principles and Their Application to Program Planning.* Tornto: Ministry of Education, Ontario.
Bryman, Alan (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Bryman, Alan (2001) *Social Research Methods*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Bugeja, M. (2006) Facing the facebook, The chronicle of Higher Education, 52,January 27th, 21, p.C1

Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979) *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis.* London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Carbonell, J. R. (1970) AI in CAI: an artificial intelligence approach to computer-aided instruction, *IEEE Transactions on Man-machine Systems*, MMS-11 (4), 190-202.

Caroll, J. (2002) *A Handbook for Deterring Plagiarism in Higher Education*, OCSD, Oxford: Oxford Brookes University.

Carr-Chellman, A. and Zhang, K. (2000) China's future with distance education: Rhetoric and reality, *Information, Communication & Society*, 3:3 303-312
Castells, M. (1996) *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture –*

Volume 1, The Rise of the Networked Society, Oxford: Blackwell.

Chan, W-T. (1963) A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.

Chan, G. Y., & Watkins, D. A. (1994). Classroom environment and approaches to learning: An investigation of the actual and preferred perceptions of Hong Kong secondry school students. *Instructional Science*, 22, 233-246.

Clarke, Alan (1999) *Evaluation Research: An Introduction to Principles*, Methods and Practice, London, Sage.

Cheng, M. (1952) *A study of the philosophy of education of Confucius and a comparison of the educational philosophies of Confucius and John Dewey*, Laramie, Wyoming: University of Wyoming

Cheng, X. (2000) Asian students' reticence revisited, *System*, 28, 435-446

Chiang, M. (1924) A study in Chinese principles of education. Shanghai: The Commercial Press

China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC)(2008): The Statistic Report of China's Internet Growth, available online: http://www.cnnic.cn/uploadfiles/pdf/2008/7/23/170516.pdf, retrieved at 2008-08-31

Chinese Education year book (2003), Beijing: People's Education Publishing House, also available from: http://www.moe.edu.cn/

Chu, H. (1990) *Learning to be a sage: selections from the conversations of Master Chu*, arranged topically, tr. D.K. Gardner, Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press.

Clopton, R.W. and Ou, T.C, (1974) John Dewey: Lectures in China, 1919-1920, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 695-696

Clouder L.and Deepwell F. (2004). Reflections on unexpected outcomes: Learning from student collaboration in an online discussion forum. In: Banks S., Goodyear P., Jones C., Lally V., McConnel D., Steeples C. (eds), *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Networked Learning 2004*. Lancaster, Lancaster University, pp. 429–435

Cohen, L., Manion, L, & Morrison Keith (2000) *Research Methods in Education* (5th Edition), RoutledgeFalmer Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York.

Cole, M., & Engeström, Y., (1993). A cultural-historical approach to distributed cognition. In G. Saloman (ed.), *Distributed Cognitions: psychological and educational considerations*, Cmabridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, M. (1996) *Cultural Psychology: A once and future discipline*, MA: Harvard University Press, Cambridge

Collins, A. (1977) Process in acquiring knowledge, in Anderson, R.C., Spiro, R.J. AND Montague, M.E. (eds), *Schooling and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, 339-63, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence-Erlbaum

Conole, G.. (2004) Report on the effectiveness of tools for e-learning, commissioned review report as part of the JISC-funded e-pedagogy desk study reviewing resources, tools and services for e-learning.

Conole, G.. (2007) An international comparison of the relationship between policy and practice in e-learning. In R. Andrews & C. Haythornthwaite (Eds), Handbook of e-learning research (pp.286-310). Sage: London.

Conole, G.. & Dyke, M. (2004) What are the affordances of information and communication technologies , *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology*, 12 (2), 114-124

Conole, G., Oliver M. Isroff, K. and Ravenscroft, A. (2004) Addressing methodological issues in e-learning research, *Proceedings in Networked Learning Conference 2004*, Sheffield.

Conole, G. & De Laat, M. (2005) *JISC Learner Experiences In-depth Case Studies – Project Plan*, E-learning Research Centre, University of Southampton, Unpublished

Conole, G. & Fill, K. (2005) A learning design toolkit to create pedagogically effective learning activities, *Journal of Interactive Multimedia Education*, special issue on learning design, Tattersall, C. (ed.)

Conole, G., Littlejohn, A. Falconer, I., and Jeffery, A. (2005), *Pedagogical review of learning activities and use cases*, LADIE project report, JISC funded project under the e-Frameworks programme.

Conole, G., De Laat, M., Dillon, T., & Darby. J. (2006) JISC LXP : Student experiences of technologies, Final report of the JISC-funded LXP project, Southampton: University of Southampton, available online at www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes. html [27/06/07]

Conole, G.., While, S. and Oliver, M. (2007a) The impact of e-learning on organisational roles and structures, in G. Conole & M. Oliver (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, methods and impacts on practice;* Routledge: London and New York.

Conole, G. Smith, J. and Whilte, S. (2007b) A critique of the impact of policy and funding, in G. Conole & M. Oliver (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, methods and impacts on practice;* Routledge: London and New York.

Coomey M and Stephenson, J (2001) Online Learning: it is all about dialogue,involvement, support and control—according to the research, in J. Stephenson (ed) *Teaching and Learning Online: Pedagogies for New Technologies*, London: Kogan Page

Cook, J., & Jacobs, N. (2004). Knowing what we mean, meaning what we say: The humpty dumpty maxim of online interaction. In S. Banks et al. (Eds), *Proceedings of the fourth international conference on networked learning* 2004 (pp. 429-435). Lancaster: Lancaster University

Cramphorn, C.(2004) An evaluation of formal and underlying factors influencing student participation within e-learning web discussion forums, *Networked Learning 2004, a research based conference on e-learning in Higher Education and lifelong Learning*, Lancaster University, England, UK

Creanor, L., Gowan, D. Howells, C. and Trinder, K. (2006) LEX: The learner experience of e-learning – Final project report, http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/LEX%20final%20Report_August06.pdf [27/06/07]

Crook, C. (2002) The Campus Experience of Networked Learning. In C. Steeples and C. Jones (ed) *Networked Learning: Perspectives and Issues*. London: Springer-Verlag.

Crook, C. (2008) What are web 2.0 technologies, and why do they matter? in Selwyn, N. (ed) *Education 2.0? Designing the web for teaching and learning: a commentary by the Technology Enhanced Learning phase of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP-TEL)*, available at: http:www.tlrp.org/pub/commentaries.html

Dahlin, B., & Watkins, D.A. (2000). The role of repetition in the processes of memorizing and understanding: A comparison of the views of Western and Chinese school students in Hong Kong. *British Journal of Educational*

Psychology, 70, 65-84.

Dam, L. (1995) *Learner Autonomy 3, From Theory to Classroom Practice*. Dublin: Authentik.

Darby, J. (2002) Networked Learning in Higher Education: The Mule in the Barn' In C. Steeples and C. Jones (ed) *Networked Learning: Perspectives and Issues*. London: Springer-Verlag.

Dawson, R. (1981) *Confucius*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, Toronto, Meibourne

De Bary, W.T., Chan, W-T, and Watson, B. (1960) *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Columbia University Press, New York and Londn.

Denscombe, M. (1998) *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and education: an introduction to the philosophy of education*, New York: Free Press

Dewey, J. (1933) *How do we think: a restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process, Dewey, John, 1859-1952*, Lexington: Mass

Dewey, J. (1934), *Art as Experience,* Minton, Balch & Co., New York

Dewey, J. (1938) Experience and Education, New York: The MacMillan Co.

Dey, I (1993) *Qualitative data analysis: A user-friendly guide for social scientists*, Routledge: London and New York

Dickinson, L. (1995) Autonomy and motivation: A literature review, System, 23/2: 165-74

Duffy, T. M. & Cunningham, D. J. (1996) Constructivism: implications for the design and delivery of instruction, in: D. Jonassen (Ed) Handbook of research for educational communications and technology (New York, Macmillan), 170-198.

Durkheim, E. (1956).*Education and Sociology*, trans. Sherwood D. & Fox Glencoe, Free Press, New York.

Dyke, M. (2001) *Reflective Learning and Reflexive Modernity as Theory Practice and Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, Educational Studies PhD Thesis, Guildford, University of Surrey.

Dyke, M. (2006) The role of the 'Other' in reflection, knowledge formation and action in a late modernity, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25 (2), 105-123

Dyke, M. (forthcoming) An enabling framework for reflexive learning: experiential learning and reflexivity in contemporary modernity, Paper accepted at *International Journal of Lifelong Education*

Dyke, M., Conole, G., Ravenscroft, A. and De Freitas, S. (2007) Learning theory and its application to e-learning, in G. Conole & M. Oliver (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, methods and impacts on practice;* Routledge: London and New York.

Edwards, C. (2004) Discourses on collaborative networked learning, *Proceedings on Networked Learning Conference 2004: a research-based conference on e-learning in higher education and lifelong learning*, Lancaster University, England, UK

Ellis, R. A. and Calvo, R. A. (2004) Learning Through Discussions in Blended Environments，*Educational Media International*，41（3），263-274

Expert Group (2003), *2003 年度全国现代远程教育试点高校网络教育学院年报检工作报告 [Examining the 2003 annual working report of e-learning in pilot universities]*. Beijing: MoE.

Frand, J. (2000) The information-age mindset: Changes in students and implications for higher education, *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 35. no.5

Fullick, P. (2004) *Knowledge building among school students working in a networked computer supported learning environment*, PhD thesis, University of Southampton, UK

Fung, Yu-lan, (1952) *A history of Chinese philosophy*, trans. By Derk Bodde, 2 vols., Princeton, Princeton University Press

Gagné, R.(1968) Learning hierarchies, *Educational Psychologists*, (6), pp.1-9

Gagné, R. M. and Driscoll, M. P. (1988) *Essentials of Learning for Instruction*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey

Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., and Field, J. (2002) 'Learning Careers and the Social Space: Exploring the Fragile Identities of Adult Returners in the New Further Education'. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol.21(6), pp.493-509.

Gao, L., & Watkins, D. A. (2001). Towards a model of teaching conceptions of

Chinese secondary school teachers of physics. in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, Hong Kong.

Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical thinking in a text-based environment: computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2 (2), 87-105

Gieve, S., & Clark, R. (2005) The Chinese approach to learning: cultural trait or situated response? The case of a self-directed learning programme, *System*, 33, 261-276

Gibbs, G. (1960) Learning Theory in Adult Education, in M. S. Knowles (ed.), *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A.

Gibbs, G., Morgan, A. and Taylor, E. （1984）The World of the Learner，in in Lockwood, F. (1995) (ed) *Open and Distance Learning Today*. Routledge, London and New York.

Giddens, A. (1976) *New Rules of Sociological Method: a Positive Critique of Interpretive Sociologies*. Hutchinson: London

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Giddens, A. (1991). The Consequences of Modernity, Cambridge: Polity

Giddens, A. (1999) *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*, London: Profile

Giddens, Anthony (2000) *Runaway World*. London : Routledge

Goleman, D. (1998) *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, New York: Bantam Books

Goodyear, P. (2001). *Effective networked learning in higher education: notes and guidelines: Centre for Studies in Advanced Learning Technology*, Lancaster University.

Goodyear, P. (2006) Technology and the articulation of vocational and academic interests: reflections on time, space and e-learning, Studies in Continuing Education, 28 (2), pp.83-98

Gorard, S. and Rees, G. (2002) *Creating a Learning Society? Learning Careers and Policies for Lifelong Learning*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Gow, L., Balla, J., Kember, D. and Hau, K.T. (1996) Learning approaches of Chinese people: a function of socialization processes and the context of learning?, in Bond, M. H. (ed), *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Grint, K. (1989) Accounting for failure: participation and non-participation in cmc. In R. Mason and A. Kaye (Eds), *Mindweave: Communication, computers and distance education*, (pp.182-192). Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Gu, Yueguo (2006) An ecological model of e-learning in a Chinese context: critical reflections of five years' practice of e-learning management in the BIOE, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 28 (2), pp.99-120

Gu, Yueguo (2007) Learning by multimedia and multimodality: some critical reflections on web-based courseware design in the Chinese context, in Spencer-Oatey, H. (ed) *E-learning Initiatives in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press

Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, SAGE Pubilications, The International Professional Publishers, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi

Gunawardena, C., Plass, J. and Salisbury, M. (2001) Do we really need an online discussion group? In Murphy, D.; Walker, R and Webb, G.(ed) *Online learning and teaching with technology: case studies, experience and practice*, London: Kogan Page

Hammond, N., Trapp, A. and Bennett, C. (2002). Small group teaching across the disciplines: setting the context for networked learning. In C. Steeples and C. Jones (ed) *Networked Learning: Perspectives and Issues*. London : Springer-Verlag.

Hara, N and Kling, R. (1999) Students' Frustrations with a Web-based Distance Education Course, *First Monday*, 4 (12), Available online: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue4_12/index.html, accessed at 16 Jan.06
Harré, R. (1983) *Personal Being: A theory for individual psychology*; Oxford : Blackwell

Hau, K. T., & Salili, F. (1991) Structure and semantic differential placement of specific causes: Academic causal attributions by Chinese students in Hong Kong, *International Journal of Psychology*, 26, 175-193.

Hendler, J., Shadbolt, N. Hall, W. Berners-Lee, T. and Weitzner, D. (2008) Web science: an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the web, *Communications of the ACM*, 51 (7), p.60-69

Heine, S. J., Kitayama, S., Lehman, D. R., Takata, T., Ide, E., Leung, C., & Matsumoto, M. (2001). Divergent consequences of success and failure in Japan and North America: An investigation of self-improving motivations and malleable selves. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 599-615.

Hess, R. D. & Azuma, M. (1991) Cultural support for schooling: contrasts between Japan and the United States, *Educational Researcher*, 20 (9), 2-8.

Hills, K. (1998) Asian learners' experience of Western distance learning. In R. Carr (eds.) *The Asian Distance Learner – Conference Papers* (Hong Kong: The Open University of Hong Kong), pp.159-163

Ho, D. Y. F. (1986) Chinese patterns of socialization: a critical review in M.H, Bond (ed): *The psychology of the Chinese People.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-37.

Ho, J. and Crookall, D. (1995) Breaking with Chinese cultural traditions: learner autonomy in English language teaching, *System*, 23 (2), 235-43.

Ho, I.T.(2001).Are Chinese Teachers Authoritarian? in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, Hong Kong.

Hodgson, V., Watland, P. & Asensio, M. (2001) Researching Networked Learning, in Rust, C. (Ed), *Proceedings of the 2001 9th International Symposium, Improving Student Learning*, 336-347

Hofstede, G. (1980) *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G. (1984). The cultural relative of the quality of life concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, 389-398.

Hollis, M. and Smith, S. (1994) Two stories about structure and agency, *Revue of International Studies*, 20, p.245

Howland, J. L. & Moore, J. L.(2002) Student Perceptions as Distance Learners in Internet-Based Courses, *Distance Education*, 23 (2), pp.183-195.

Howard-Jones, P. (2008) Neuroscience and education: Issues and opportunities, a commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), Available online: http://www.tlrp.org/pub/index.html

Huang, R., Jiang, X. and Zhang, H. S.(2007) The Informationazation of Higher Education in China: Present situation and challenges, in Spencer-Oatey, H (ed) e-Learning Initiatives in China: Pedagogy, Policy and Culture, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong

Hughes, E. R. (Edit and Trans.) (1942) Chinese Philosophy in Classic Times, London: J.M. DENT & SONS LTD., New York: E.P.DUTTON &CO.INC

Hughes, M. & Daykin, N. (2002) Towards constructivism: investigating students' perceptions and learning as a result of using online environment, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 39 (3), 217-224.

Hughes, G. & Lewis, L. (2003) Who are successful online learners? Exploring the different learner identities produced in virtual learning environments, in: J. Cook & D. McConnell (Eds) *Communities of Practice. Research Proceedings of the 10th Association for Learning Technology Conference (ALT-C 2003)*, 8-10 September 2003, The university of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Hughes, S., Wickersham, L., Ryan-Jones, d and Smith, S (2002) Overcoming social and psychological barriers to effective on-line collaboration, *Educational Technology and Society*, 5 (1), pp.86-92

Hutchins, E. (1995) Cognition in the Wild. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Irwin, T. (1985) *Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics*, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Iyengar, S.S., Lepper, M. R. and Ross, L. (1999) Independence from whom? Interdependence from whom? Cultural perspectives on ingroups versus outgroups. In D. A. Prentice and D. T. Miller (Eds.) *CulturalDidivides: Understanding and overcoming group conflict*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Jacobs, N. and Cook, J. (2004) *SOLE Case Study Series: Discourse Analysis Report*, Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee). Online at http://sole.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/DiscourseAnalysis.pdf, accessed 15 Jan 2006.

Jarvis, P. (1987) *Adult Learning in the Social Context*, London: Croom Helm

Jarvis, P. (1995) *Adult and Continuing Education: theory and Practice, (2nd Edition)* London: Routledge

Jarvis, P. (2004) *Adult Education and Lifelong Learning: theory and practice,* (3rd edition) RoutledgerFalmer, London and New York

Ji, L., Peng, K., & Nisbett, R. E. (2000) Culture, control, and perception of relationships in the environment, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 943-955.

Jin, L.X. & Cortazzi, M. (1998) Dimensions of dialogue: large classes in China, *International Journal of Educational Research*, 29, 739-361.

Jonassen, D.H (1994) Thinking technology: toward a Constructivist design model, *Educational Technology*, March/April 34-37

Jonassen, D.H., & Reeves, T. C. (1996) Learning with Technology: using computers as cognitive tools, in D.H. Jonassen (Ed) *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technology,* pp. 693-720. New York: Macmilan Press.

Jones, A.& Mercer, N, (1993) Theories of Learning and Information Technology in Scrimsaw, P. (Ed.) *Language, Classrooms and Computers*, London: Routledge

Jones, C. (2000). From the sage on the stage to what exactly? Description and the place of the moderator in co-operative and collaborative learning. In : Squires, D., Jacobs, G. and Conole, G. (eds). *The changing face of learning technology: selected papers from ALT-J.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Jones, C., Asensio, M., & Goodyear, P. (2000). Networked learning in higher education: Practitioners' perspectives, *Association for Learning Technology Journal*, 8(2), 18-28

Jones, C and Steeples, C. (2002) Perspective and Issues in Networked Learning In Steeples, C & Jones, C (Eds) *Networked Learning: Perspectives and Issues*, London: Springer

Jones, P., Miller, C., Packman, G. and Thomas, B. (2004) *Student and Tutor Perspectives of Online Moderation*, Welsh Enterprise Institute, University of Glamorgan.

Kang, F.Y. and Song, G. (2007) e-Learning in higher education in China: An overview, in Spencer-Oatey, H. (Eds) e-Learning Initiatives in China: Pedagogy,

Policy and Culture, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong

Kant, I. (1781) *Critique of Pure Reason* in Translation by Politis, V 1993, London Everyman.

Kear, K (2004) Peer learning using asynchronous discussion systems in distance education, *Open Learning*, 19 (2), 151-164.

Keegan, D. (1994) Very large distance education systems: the case of China, *ZIFF Papiere 94*

Keenan, B. (1977) *The Dewey Experiment in China: educational reform and political power in the early public,* Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England.

Kember, D. and Gow, L. (1991) A challenge to the anecdotal stereotype of the Asian students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 161, 117-128.

Kember, D. (1995) *Open Learning Courses for Adults: a model of student progress*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications.

Kember, D., Wong, A. and Leung, D. Y.P., (1999) Reconsidering the dimensions of approaches to learning, *British Journal of Educational Psychology,* 69, 323-343.

Kember, D. (2000) Misconceptions about the learning approaches, motivation and study practices of Asian students, *Higher Education*, 40, 99-121

Kember, D. (2001) Transforming Teaching Through Action Research, in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, Hong Kong.

Kennedy, P. (2002) Learning cultures and learning styles: myth-understandings about adult (Hong Kong) Chinese learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 21 (5), 430-445

Knowles, M. (1975) *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers*. New York: Cambridge Books.

Knowles, M. (1980) *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: from Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Revised and Updated, New Jersey: Cambridge Adult Education.

Knowles, M. (1987) Andragogy: an emerging technology for adult learning, in:

m. Tight (eds) *Adult Learning and Education*, London: Routledge

Knox, A. B. (1977). *Adult development and learning.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kidd, J.R.(1973) How Adults Learn. New York: Cambridge Books.

Kolb, D. A (1984) *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall

Kilker, J. (2002) When and Where Appropriate: lessons from "foreign" contexts for he pedagogical use of web-based technologies in the United States, in R.A. Cole (ed) *Issues in Web-based pedagogy: a critical primer*, Greenwood Press, London

Kirkwood, A., and Price, L. (2005). Learners and Learning in the 21st Century: What do we know about students' attitudes and experiences of ICT that will help us design courses? *Studies in Higher Education 30*(3), 257-274.

Kremer, J. & McGuinness, C. (1998). Cutting the cord: Student-led discussion groups in higher education. *Education and Training, 40*(2), 44-49.

Kvavik, R. (2005) Convenience, Communication and Control: How students use technology, in Oblinger, D. G., & Oblinger, J. L. (2005). Educating the net generation, An Educause e-book publication, http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7101.pdf, [25/11/07]

Labriola, A. (1985) Essays on he Materialist Conception of History, in K. Thompson (ed.), *Readings from Emile Durkheim*, Chichester, Ellis Horwood

Lambe, P.J. (2006) Conceptualising and measuring agency using the British Household Panel Survey, A paper presented at the BERA Annual Conference 6-9 September 2006, University of Warwick,

Lash, S. & Urry, J. (1994) *Economies of Signs and Space*, London: Sage
Layder, D. (1994) *Understanding Social Theory.* London: Sage.

Laurillard, D. (1994) How Can Learning Technologies Improve Learning? Law Technology Journal, Vol 3, No 2. http://www.warwick.ac.uk/ltj/3-2j.html

Laurillard, D. (2002) *Rethinking University Teaching: a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*, RoutledgerFalmer, London and New York

Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Leaderbetter, C. (2008) People power transforms the web in next online revolution, The observer, March 9th, p.26

Lee, C. (1999) Learning through tutorial discussion and learners' culture: some preliminary observations from the views of Hong Kong Chinese Tertiary students, *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 12 (3), 255-264

Lee Wing On (1996) The Cultural Context for Chinese Learners: Conceptions of Learning in the Confucian Tradition, in Watkins, D. A. and Biggs, J.B. (eds) (1996) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Legge, J. (1893) The Chinese Classics. Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press.

Lockitt, B. (2004). *Adult, Community and work based learning: e-learning*, 3T productions.

Lockwood, F. (1995) 'Students' Perception of, and response to, formative and summative assessment material' in Lockwood, F. (ed) *Open and Distance Learning Today*. Routledge, London and New York.

Li, J.(2003) The core of Confucian learning, *American Psychologist,* 58, 146-147.

Li, J.(2004) Learning as a task or a virture: U.S. and Chinese preshoolers explain learning, *Developmental Psychology*, 40 (4), 595-605.

Light, P. & Light, V. (1999) Analysing asynchronous learning interactions: computer-mediated communication in a conventional undergraduate setting in K. Littleton & P. Light (eds) *Learning with Computers: analysing productive interaction*, London: Routledge

Light, P., Nesbitt, E., Light, V. and White, S. (2000) Variety is the spice of life: Student use CMC in the context of campus based study', *Computers and Education*, 34, 257-67.

Little, D. (1994) Learners autonomy: a theoretical construct and its practical

application, *Die Neueren Sprachen,* 93, 5, 430-42

Littlewood, W. (1999) Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian Contexts, *Applied Linguistics*, 20/1:71-94

Liu N-F & Littlewood, W. (1997) Why do many students appear reluctant to participate in classroom learning discourse, *System*, 25 (3), 371-384

Lyotard, J.-F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge.* Manchester: Manchester University Press

Macdonale, J. (2003) Assessing online collaborative learning: process and product, *Computers & Education*, 40 (4). May 2003, 377-391.

Macdonale, J. (2004) Developing competent e-learners: the role of assessment, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29 (2). April, 2004, 215-226

Mann, C., Stewart, F.(2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A handbook for researching online*, Sage Publications: London, Thosand Oaks, New Delhi

Maor, D (2003) Teacher's and students' perspectives on on-line learning in a social constructivist learning environment, *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 12 (2), pp.201-218

Marton, F. & Saljo, R. (1976). On Qualitative Differences in Learning – I: Outcome and Process, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 46, 4-11

Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G and Tse, L. K.(1996). Memorizing and Understanding: The Keys to the Paradox? In Watkins, D. A. and Biggs, J.B. (eds) (1996) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Marton, F. Watkins, D. and Tang, C. (1997) Discontinuities and continuities in the experience of learning: an interview study of high-school students in Hong Kong, *Learning and Instruction*, 7 (1), 21-48.

Marx, K. (1845) Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume One, p. 13 – 15, Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1969

Masuda, T., & Nisbett, R. E. (2001) Attending holistically versus analytically: Comparing the context sensitivity of Japanese and Americans, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 922-934.

Mason, R. (1994) *Using Communications Media in Open and Flexible Learning*, Kogan Page.

Manson, J. (2002) (2nd edition) *Qualitative researching*, SAGE Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi

Marais, E., Minnaar, U. and Argles, D. (2005) Plagiarism in e-learning systems: identifying and solving the problem for practical assignments. Submitted to 15th International World Wide Web Conference, Edinburgh, Scotland. Available online at: http://eprints.ecs.soton.ac.uk/11598/, accessed at 30 September 2006

Mason, R.(2006) Learning technologies for adult continuing education, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 28 (2), pp.121-133

Mayes, T. (2001) Learning technology and learning relationships, in: J. Stephenson (Ed.) *Teaching and Learning Online* ,London: Kogan Page

Mayes, T. and S. De Freitas (2004). *Review of e-learning frameworks, models and theories*: JISC e-learning models desk study, JISC.

McAlpine, I., Koppi, T., Mclean, J., & Pearson, E. (2004) Course developers as students: A designers perspective of the experience of online learning. *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology*, 12, 147-162

McGrath, I, Sinclair, B. and Zehang, C. (2007) Designing an innovative online course in language teaching methodology for middle school teachers of English in China: Encouraging learner and teacher autonomy, in Spencer-Oatey, H. (ed) *E-learning Initiatives in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press

Mencius (1970) *Mencius*, tr. D.C. Lao. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books

Meyer, K.(2003) Face-to-face versus threaded discussions: the role of time and higher-order thinking, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 7 (3)

McAlpine, I., Loppi, T., McLean, J. and Pearson, E. (2004) Course developers as students: a designer perspective of the experience of learning online, Alt-J, 12 (2), p.147-162

McCartan, A. (2000) Use of IT in a postgraduate distance learning course: part 1: students experiences, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 37 (3), 181-191

McConnell, D.(1999). Examining a collaborative assessment process in networked lifelong learning. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 15, 232-242

McConnell, D. (2000). *Implementing Computer Supported Cooperative Learning*. London: Kogan Page

McCormick, R. & Scrimshaw, P. (2001) Information and Communications Technology, Knowledge and Pedagogy, *Education, Communication & Information* 1 (1): 37-57

McGrath, J.E. (1990) Time matters in groups. In Galegher, R.E. Kraut, & C. Egido, *Intellectual Teamwork: Social and Technological Foundations of Cooperative Work* (pp.23-61), Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Meadows, S. (2004) Models of cognition in childhood: metaphors, achievements and problems, in H. Daniels & A. Edwards (ed) The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Psychology of Education, London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1984) *Qualitative data analysis: a sourcebook of new methods*, Beverly Hills, Sage

MoE (1999a) 深化教育改革，全面推进素质教育- 第三次全国教育工作会议文件汇编 *[Concerning Educational Reform: Deepening and Enhancing Quality Education]* Beijing: Higher Education Publishing Company

MoE (1999b) Looking forward the twenty-first century education promotion action plan. In MoE, *Concerning Educational Reform: Deepening and Enhancing Quality Education*, pp.339-356, Beijing: Higher Education Publishing Company

Monteith, M. & Smith, J. (2001) Learning in a virtual campus: the pedagogical implications of students' experiences, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 38, 2, 119-32.

Moore, K. and Aspden, l. (2004). 'Coping, adapting, evolving: the student experience of e-learning.' *Library and Information Update, Sheffield Hallam University* April 2004

Morgan, A., (1993) *Improving Your Students' Learning: Reflections on the Experience of Study,* Kogan Page: London, Philadelphia.

Mori, I. (2008) *Student experiences of technology and e-learning*, Coventry, JISC

Motteram, G.& Forrster, G.(2005) Becoming an online distance learner: what can be learned from students' experiences of induction to distance programmes? *Distance Education*, 26 (3), pp.281-298

Muller, F. Max (Ed) (1885) *Sacred Books of the East*, London: Oxford University Press

National Bureau of Statistics of China (2007) China Statistical Yearbook 2007, Available online (In Chinese): http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20080228_402464933.htm, [31/08/2008]

Nardi, B. A. (1996) Studying context: a comparison of activity theory, situated action models, and distributed cognition, in B. A. Nardi (eds) *Context and Consciousness: Activity Theory and Human-Computer Interaction*, London: The MIT Press

Ng, K-C., **(**2001.) Using e-mail to foster collaboration in distance education. *Open Learning,* Vol. 16, No. 2, pp 191–200.

Oblinger, D. G., & Oblinger, J. L. (2005). Educating the net generation, An Educause e-book publication, http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7101.pdf, [25/11/07]

Oliver, M. & Harvey, J. (2002) What does 'impact' mean in the evaluation of learning technology? *Educational Technology & Society*, 5 (3), 18-26.

Oliver, R. (2001) It seemed like a good idea at the time, In Murphy, D.; Walker, R and Webb, G. (Ed) *Online learning and teaching with technology*, Kogan Page, London.

Oliver, M & Conole, G.. (2007) Conclusion in G. Conole & M. Oliver (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, methods and impacts on practice;* Routledge: London and New York.

Oliver, M, Roberts, G. Beetham, H. Ingraham, B. Dyke, M. and Levy, P. (2007) Knowledge, society and perspectives on learning technology, in G. Conole and M.Oliver (ed) Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research

O'Regan, K. (2003) Emotion and e-learning, *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 7(3), 78-92

Papert, S. (1980) *Mindstorms: Computers and Powerful Ideas*, New York: Basic Books

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Peachey, P. (2004). An 'addictive' property of the discussion forums of a VLE as perceived by students undertaking a Web-based course. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association conference, U.M.I.S.T. Manchester, UK. September 16–18.

Plato (1961) Statesman, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* Eds E Hamilton, H Cairns (Pantheon Books, New York)

R.S.Peters (1966) *Ethics and Education*, London: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN

Piaget, J. (1929) *The child's conception of the world,* Routledge 1997 c1929

Piaget, J. (1971) Biology and Knowledge, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Pratt, D. D. (1991) Conceptions of self within China and the United States: Contrasting foundations for adult education, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 15, 285-310

Prensky, M. (2001) Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Part I On the Horizon, 9 (5). Available at: http: www.marcprensky.com/writing/

Prosser. M. & Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The Experience in Higher Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.

Ravenscroft ,A. (2000) Designing argumentation for conceptual development, *Computers and Education*, 34, 241-55.

Richardson, J. T.E. (2000) *Researching Student Learning: Approaches to studying in Campus-based and distance Education*, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press. Buckingham

Rimmershaw, R. (1999) Using conferencing to support a culture of collaborative study. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 15, 189-200

Robison, L.M., Sclar, D.A., Skaer, T.L. and Galin, R.S. (1999) National trends in the prevalence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and the prescribing of

methylphenidate among school-age children: 1990-1995, *Clinical Paediatrics*, 38, 209-217

Ronteltrap, F., & Eurelings, A. (2002) Activity and interaction of students in an electronic learning environment for problem-based learning. *Distance Education*, 23, pp.11-22

Rogoff, B. (1990) *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Rourke, L. & Anderson, T. (2002) Exploring social interaction in computer conferencing, *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 13 (3), 257-273

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 1712-1778 (1968) *The Social Contract*, Harmondsworth ; New York : Penguin

Rowntree, D. (1995). Teaching and learning online: a correspondence education for the 21st century? *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 26 (3), 205-215.

Ruberg, L. F., Moore, D. N. & Taylor, C.D. (1996). Student participation, interaction, and regulation in a computer-mediated communication environment: a qualitative study. *Journal of Educational Computer Research*, 14 (3), 243-268.

Russell, D. (2002) Looking beyond the interface: activity theory and distributed learning, in M.R.Lea and K.Nicoll (eds) Distributed Learning: Social and cultural approach to practice, Routledge Falmer, London and New York

Ryan, R. M. (1991) The nature of the self in autonomy and relatedness in J. Strauss and G. R. Goethals (eds): The Seld: Interdisciplinary Approaches, New York: Oxford University: Springer: 208-38

Salili, F. (1996). Teacher-student Interaction: Attributional Implications and Effectiveness of Teachers' Evaluative Feedback, in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, HongKong.

Salili, F., Chiu, C.Y., & Lai, S. (2001). The influence of culture and context on students'' achievement orientations. In F. Salili, C. Y. Chiu, & Y.Y. Hong (Eds.), *Student motivation: The culture and context of learning* (pp.221-247). New York: Plenum.

Salmon, G. (2002) *E-tivities: the key to active online learning*, Kogan Page.

Salomon, G. (2000) *It's not just the tool, but the educational rationale that counts*: Invited keynote address at the 2000 ED-Media Meeting, Montreal, June, 2000

Sawyer, R.K. (2002) Unsolved Tensions in Sociocultural Theory: Analogies with Contemporary Sociological Debates, *Culture & Psychology*, 8(3) 283-305.

Selwyn, N (2008) Educational hopes and fears for web 2.0, at Selwyn, N. (ed) *Education 2.0? Designing the web for teaching and learning: a commentary by the* Technology Enhanced Learning phase of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP-TEL), available at: http:www.tlrp.org/pub/commentaries.html

Sclater, N. Conole, G. Warburton, B. and Harvery, J. (2007) E-assessment, in G. Conole and M. Oliver (eds) *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: themes, modes and impact on practice*, Routledge: London and New York

Schell, G.P. (2001) Student perceptions of web-based course quality and benefit, *Education and Information technologies*, 6(2), pp.95-104.

Scott, J. (1995) *Sociology Theory: Contemporary Debates*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Selwyn, N. Crook, C. Carr, D. Carmichael, P. , Noss, R. and Laurillard, D. (2008) Education 2.0? Towards an educational web 2.0? in Selwyn (ed) *Education 2.0? Designing the web for teaching and learning*, *TLRP-TEL commentary,* Available online: http://www.tlrp.org/pub/index.html

Sharpe, R., Benfield, G. Lessner, E. and DeCicco E. (2005) Scoping Study for the Pedagogy strand of the JISC e-learning Programme, Available online at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/scoping%20study%20final%20report%20v4.1.doc

Shen ,J. (2001) Confucius, 551-479BCE. in Palmer, J.A.(eds) *Fifty Major Thinkers on Education: From Confucius to Dewey*, Routledge, London and New York

Skinner, B.F. (1954) The science of learning and the art of teaching, *Harvard Educational Review*, 88-97.

Smith, C. B. (1997). Casting the net: surveying an Internet population. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication,* 3 (1)

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Publications..

Stephenson, L. & Haberman, D.L. (1998). *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford.

Suchman, L. (1987). *Plans and Situated Actions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sweeney, J.; O'Donoghue, T. and Sperring, A.(2004) Traditional face-to-face and web-based tutorials: a study of university students' perspectives on the roles of tutorial participants，*Teaching in Higher Education*, 9(3), 311-323.

Tang, C. (1996) Collaborative Learning: the Latent Dimension in Chinese Students' Learning, in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, Hong Kong

The Analects (1993), (Translated by Dawson, R.) Oxford：Oxford University Press

The Doctrine of Mean (1966) translated by Legge, J., in The Chinese Classics, vols. 1 -2, pp.382-434, reprint: Wen –hsing Book Co., Taipei

The Doctrine of Mean (1991) in J.M. Koller and P. Koller (ed) *A Sourcebook in Asian Philosophy, Prentice* Hall, New Jersey

Thorpe, M. (2002) From independent learning to collaborative learning: new communities of practice in open, distance and distributed learning, in Lea, M. AND Nicoll, K. (eds), *Distributed Learning: Social and Cultural Approaches to Practice*, 131-51. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Thorpe, M. and Godwin, S. (2006) Interaction and e-learning: the student experience, *Studies in Continuing Education*, 28 (3), 203-221.

Timms, S., O'Leary, R., Weedon, E., Martin, K. (2004) A Multi-disciplinary, Holistic Approach to Networked Learning Research: a critique of a large-scale empirical study into student online learning experiences, Paper Presented at Networked Learning 2004, Lancaster, U.K. available at : http://www.shef.ac.uk/nlc2004/Proceedings/Contents.htm

Thomas, B. Jones, P., Packman, G. and Miller, C (2004), Student perceptions of effective e-moderation: a qualitative investigation of e-college Wales, in *Proceedings of Networked Learning Conference 2004*, Lancaster, UK. April, 2004

Tolmie, A. and Boyle, J. (2000) Factors influencing the success of computer mediated communication (CMC) environments in university teaching: a review and case study, *Computers & Education*, 34 (2), 119-140

Tu, W. M. (1979). *Humanity and self-cultivation: essays in Confucian thought*, Berkeley, Calif: Asian Humanities Press.

Tweed, R.G. & Lehman, D.R. (2002) Learning considered within a cultural context: Confucian and Socratic approach, *American Psychologist*, 57 (2), 89-99.

Usher, R., & Bryant, I. (1989) *Adult Education as Theory, Practice and Research: The captive triangle*, London: Routledge

Usher, R., Bryant, I. & Johnstone, R. (1997) *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge*, London: Routledge

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind and Society*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press

Volet, S. E.& Renshaw, P. D. (1996) Chinese students at an Australian university: Adaptability and continuity, In D.A. Watkins & J.B. Biggs (Eds) *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological, and contextual influences*, pp.205-220. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research

Wang, Q. (2001) Cultural effects on adults' earliest childhood recollection and self-description: implications for the relation between memory and the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 220-233.

Watkins, D. (1996). Hong Kong secondary school learners; a developmental perspective, in Watkins, D. A. & Biggs, J. B. (eds) *Teaching the Chinese Learner: Psychological and pedagogical Perspectives,* University of Hong Kong Comparative Education Centre, Hong Kong
Ward, M. and Newlands, D (1998) Use of the Web in undergraduate teaching, *Computers & Education*, Vol 31, pp 171–184.

Watkins, D. A. and Biggs, J.B. (eds) *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*, Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Wertsch, J.V. (1993) Commentary. *Human Development*, 36, 168-171

Wertsch, J.V. (1994) The primacy of mediated action in sociocultural studies. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 1 (4), 202-208.

Wong, N-Y. (2004) The CHC learner's phenomenon: Its implications on mathematics education, perspectives from insiders, In L.H.Fan, N-Y Wong., J.F.Cai and S.Q.Li (Eds) *How Chinese Learn Mathematics*, World Scientific: New Jersey, London, Singapore, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, Chennai.

Xu, Y-Z (2005) *Confucius Modernized,* Preface, Higher Education Press, Beijing

Yan, L. (1996) Learning outside the classroom: Students' involvement in peer group work, in James, R. and McInnis, C. (eds) *Transition to Active Learning: Proceedings of the 2nd Pacific Rim Conference on the First Year in Higher Education*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourn

Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing.

Yu, A. B.(1996), Ultimate life concerns, self and Chinese achievement motivation. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology* (pp.227-246). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Zhang, W. (2005) Modern distance learning and Asian educational reform, *China Distance Education*, 7.

Zhou, Y. R. Knoke, D. and Sakamoto, I. (2005) Rethinking silence in the classroom: Chinese students' experiences of sharing indigenous knowledge, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 9 (3), 287-311.

Ziegler, S. (2007) The (mis)education of Generation M, Learning, Media and Technology, 32 (1) p.69.

Appendix 1: WeSU Programme – Baseline information Questionnaire for Learners

Introduction

This questionnaire is designed to gather information about your experience of using the modules developed under the WeSUprogramme

It aims to help inform the project team and the developers about your learning needs, skills and circumstance; the information gathered will be treated confidentially and will not be used to identify you personally.

The questionnaire is being sent to students who will be going to use the [*WeSUmaterials-course name*].

For the purposes of the evaluation learning refers to the use of Information and Communication Technologies (including the Internet) to support learning and teaching.

Baseline data

- This section gathers data on your prior knowledge and experience, your reasons for participating and your expectations of using the materials.
- For each of the following questions, please tick the appropriate answer or fill in the blank spaces.

WeSUID	
Name (optional)	

Personal information

Question 1.

1.1 Study centre	
1.2 Course / Programme	
1.3 Number of years in teaching	
1.4 Subject(s) area you teach	
1.5 Are you a qualified teacher?	

1.6 What kind of institute where you work	Primary school	Secondary school	Professional training	College	University
1.7 Qualifications					
1.8 Your highest qualification of English language					

Question 2.

	30 or under	31-40	41-50	51-60	Over 60
2.1 How old are you?					

Question 3.

	Female	Male
3.1 What is your gender?		

Computer Access

Question 4.

I can access a computer (Tick all that apply)	Yes	No
4.1 at home?		
4.2 at work?		

4.3 at study centre?		
4.4 elsewhere? please specify		
4.5 if you share a computer, how many people do you share with		
4.6 estimate the number of hours you can make use of a computer for study each week		

Question 5.

I can access the Internet	Yes	No
5.1 at home?		
5.2 at work?		
5.3 at study centre?		
5.4 elsewhere? please specify		
5.5 describe the type of access (modem / ISDN /broadband		
5.6 how reliable is your Internet access		

Question 6.

I can access a printer	Yes	No
6.1 at home?		
6.2 at work?		
6.3 at study centre?		

6.4 elsewhere? please specify	

Question 7.

Can the computer you use do the following	Yes	No
7.1 play video with sounds		
7.2 load software with a CD		
7.3 play a DVD		

Computer skills

Question 8.

I use the following:	Never	Occasionally	Frequently
8.1 Word			
8.2 Excel			
8.3 Access (Database)			
8.4 PowerPoint (Presentation software)			
8.5 Email			
8.6 The Internet			
8.7 Search engines (Google, Yahoo, Sina)			
8.8 E-learning materials			
8.9 Online mailing lists			
8.10 Discussion boards (like Web board, *Blogs*)			
8.11 Live chat (like MSN, QQ, Yahoo Messenger)			
8.12 Virtual Learning Environments (like			

WebCT or Blackboard)			
8.13 Video conferencing			
8.14 Library online catalogues			
8.15 Online databases			

Question 9.

How would you describe your	Expert	Good	Fair	Novice	No experience
9.1 general level of computer experience					
9.2 use and knowledge of the Internet					
9.3 use of email					
9.4 use of online learning environments					

Question 10.

How often do you use a computer? (please tick)	More than 4 hours a day	Between 1-4 Hours a day	Occasionally each day	Occasionally each week /month	Never

Work in schools

Question 11

11.1 Is it possible for you to use computers in your school for teaching at the moment?	Yes	No
11.2 If not, when do you think it will be possible?		

Question 12.

12.1 Are there any barriers to you using computers in your school at the moment?	Yes	No
12.2 If yes, what are the barriers?		

Question 13.

How often do you use the following in your teaching? If you are using computers in your teaching now, how do you use them?	All the time	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Computer lab					
Internet					
Books					
Cassettes					
Images					
Video					

Question 14.

14.1 Does the school you work for provide training and support to you to use computer in teaching?	Yes	No
If yes, please describe:		
14.2 Do you require additional training and support to use computers in your teaching?	Yes	No
If yes, please describe:		

eLearning and the programme of study

Question 15.

Have you attended any other online or distant learning course?	Yes	No
If yes, please describe your experiences.		

Question 16.

What do you understand to be the benefits of studying these modules?

Question 17.

What are your main reasons for taking these WeSUmodules?

Question 18.

What concerns do you have in following these modules?

Question 19.

What training and support do you feel you need in order to take these modules?

Question 20.

Please tell us if you have any other comments
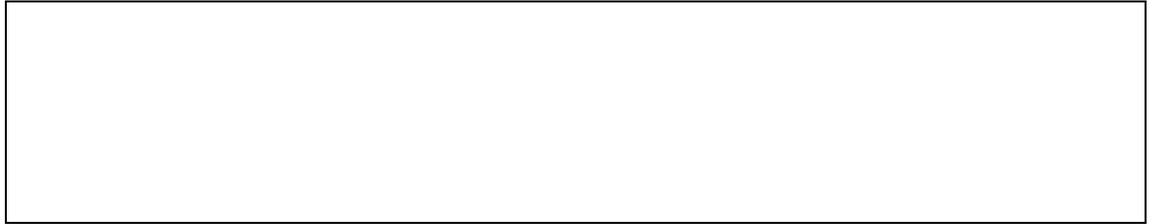
Thank you very much for taking time to complete this questionnaire.

Appendix 2: WeSU Programme - Baseline information questionnaire results

Learner's profile (n=82)

1.1 **Participated school**   (n=6)

	N	%	location
• Red Temple secondary school	19	23.2	Wushun
• Wushun No. 3 secondary school	5	6.1	Wushun
• Yangsong secondary school	1	1.2	Wushun
• Yanjing No. 7 secondary school	10	12.2	Yanjing
• Yanjing No. 5 secondary school	15	18.3	Yanjing
• Beidu Shiyan school	32	39.0	Beidu

1.2 **Module studying** (n=82)

module name	N	%
educational psychology	27	32.9
modern pedagogy	27	32.9
educational technology	28	34.1

1.3 **Qualified teacher** (n=82)

Are you a qualified teacher?	N	%
Yes	79	96.3
No	3	3.7

1.4 **Subject taught** (n=82)

Subject area you taught	N	%
English	78	95.1
History	1	1.2
English and music	1	1.2
Computer	1	1.2
Missing	1	1.2

1.5 Number of year in teaching (n=82)

Total	77	93.9
Missing	5	6.1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.5	1	1.2	1.3	1.3
	1.0	7	8.5	9.1	10.4
	2.0	7	8.5	9.1	19.5
	2.5	1	1.2	1.3	20.8
	3.0	6	7.3	7.8	28.6
	3.5	1	1.2	1.3	29.9
	4.0	6	7.3	7.8	37.7
	5.0	7	8.5	9.1	46.8
	6.0	3	3.7	3.9	50.6
	7.0	2	2.4	2.6	53.2
	8.0	1	1.2	1.3	54.5
	9.0	1	1.2	1.3	55.8

	10.0	1	1.2	1.3	57.1
	11.0	4	4.9	5.2	62.3
	12.0	2	2.4	2.6	64.9
	13.0	3	3.7	3.9	68.8
	14.0	4	4.9	5.2	74.0
	15.0	8	9.8	10.4	84.4
	16.0	2	2.4	2.6	87.0
	18.0	1	1.2	1.3	88.3
	20.0	4	4.9	5.2	93.5
	21.0	1	1.2	1.3	94.8
	23.0	1	1.2	1.3	96.1
	25.0	1	1.2	1.3	97.4
	28.0	1	1.2	1.3	98.7
	29.0	1	1.2	1.3	100.0
	Total	77	93.9	100.0	
Missing	System	5	6.1		
Total		82	100.0		

1.6 School category (n=82)

	N	%
Primary	15	18.3
junior secondary	24	29.3
senior secondary	41	50
Missing	2	2.4

1.7 Highest educational qualification (n=82)

Qualification		%
below college		
College		
first degree	79	96.3
Masters	2	2.4
Doctorate		
Other (diploma)	1	1.2

1.8 English level (n=82)

Level of English	N	%
CET4		
CET6	4	4.9
Professional 4	24	29.3
Professional 8	23	28.0
Other	3	3.7
Missing	28	34.1

2. Age (n=82)

Age group	30 or under	31-40	41-50	51-60	Over 60	missing
Number	48	30	3	1		
%	58.5	36.6	3.7	1.2		

3.   Gender (n=82)

	N	%
female	66	80.5
male	16	19.5

4.   Access to a computer

4.1/2   Access to a computer at home /work /other place (n=82)

		N	%
At home	yes	68	82.9
	no	8	9.8
	missing	6	7.3
At work	yes	79	96.3
	no	2	2.4
	missing	1	1.2
At other places	at friends	3	3.7

4.4 Computer sharing (n=27)

The number of the people sharing with		%	
1	2	2.4	2.4
2	12	14.6	17
3	1	1.2	18.2
5	4	4.9	23.1
6	2	2.4	25.5
8	1	1.2	26.7
10	5	6.1	32.8

4.5 How many hours you anticipate spending on the study each week (n=82)

	N	%
Numbers responded	74	90.2
missing	8	9.8

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.0	1	1.2	1.4	1.4
	2.0	7	8.5	9.5	10.8
	3.0	2	2.4	2.7	13.5
	4.0	4	4.9	5.4	18.9
	4.5	2	2.4	2.7	21.6
	5.0	22	26.8	29.7	51.4
	5.5	1	1.2	1.4	52.7
	6.0	7	8.5	9.5	62.2
	6.5	2	2.4	2.7	64.9
	7.0	2	2.4	2.7	67.6
	7.5	4	4.9	5.4	73.0
	8.0	2	2.4	2.7	75.7
	10.0	6	7.3	8.1	83.8
	12.0	1	1.2	1.4	85.1
	12.5	1	1.2	1.4	86.5
	14.0	2	2.4	2.7	89.2
	15.0	3	3.7	4.1	93.2

	20.0	4	4.9	5.4	98.6
	30.0	1	1.2	1.4	100.0
	Total	74	90.2	100.0	
Missing	System	8	9.8		
Total		82	100.0		

5   Internet access

5.1/2/3   I can access to the Internet at home/work/other places (n=82)

		N	%
At home	yes	51	62.2
	no	20	24.4
	missing	11	13.4
At work	yes	79	96.3
	no	2	2.4
	Missing	1	1.2
At other places	at friends	2	2.4
	Internet cafe	2	2.4

5.4   Internet service   (n=82)

	N	%	
modem	12	14.6	
ISDN	40	48.8	
Broadband	18	22.2	
missing	12	14.6	

5.5 How reliable your Internet access (n=82)

	N	%	
very unreliable	1	1.2	
unreliable	12	14.6	
neutral	15	18.3	
reliable	41	50	
Unclassified	2	2.4	
missing	11	13.4	

6   Access to printer

6.1 Access to a printer at home/work/any other place (n=82)

		N	%	
At home	Yes	23	28.0	
	No	41	50.0	
	missing	18	22.0	
At work	Yes	73	89.0	
	No	3	3.7	
	missing	6	7.3	
Any other places	at friends	2	2.4	
	Internet cafe	1	1.2	

7   Functions of computer

Computer skills

Question 8. skills of computer/Internet applications

I use the following:	Never	Occasionally	Frequently	missing
8.1 Word	0	6	76	0
	0	7.3	92.7	0
8.2 Excel	3	47	29	3
	3.7	57.3	35.4	3.7
8.3 Access (Database)	58	6	0	18
	70.7	7.3	0	22.0
8.4 PowerPoint (Presentation software)	1	16	63	2
	1.2	19.5	76.8	2.4
8.5 Email	3	23	53	3
	3.7	28.0	64.6	3.7
8.6 The Internet	2	8	70	2
	2.4	9.8	85.6	2.4
8.7 Search engines (Google, Yahoo, Sina)	2	6	69	5
	2.4	7.3	84.1	6.1
8.8 E-learning materials	19	38	18	7
	23.2	46.3	22.0	8.5
8.9 Online mailing lists	39	26	9	8
	47.6	31.7	11.0	9.8
8.10 Discussion boards (like Web board, *Blogs*)???	43	23	7	9

	52.4	28.0	8.5	11.0
8.11 Live chat (like MSN, QQ, Yahoo Messenger)	22	25	30	5
	26.8	30.5	36.6	6.1
8.12 Virtual Learning Environments (like WebCT or Blackboard)	63	7	1	11
	76.8	8.5	1.2	12.5
8.13 Video conferencing	63	9	1	9
	76.8	11.0	1.2	11.0
8.14 Library online catalogues	50	20	4	8
	61.0	20.4	4.9	9.8
8.15 Online databases	22	38	15	7
	26.8	46.3	18.3	8.5

Question 9. General ICT skills

How would you describe your	Expert	Good	Fair	Novice	No experience
9.1 general level of computer experience	1	13	56	7	5
	1.2	15.9	68.3	8.5	6.1
9.2 use and knowledge of the Internet	1	16	51	10	3
	1.2	19.5	62.2	12.2	3.7
9.3 use of email	1	19	48	6	6
	1.2	23.2	58.5	12.2	7.3
9.4 use of online learning environments	1	7	13	6	30
	1.2	8.5	15.9	7.3	36.6

Question 10. Frequency of using computer

How often do you use a computer? (please tick)	More than 4 hours a day	Between 1-4 Hours a day	less than 1 hour a day	less than 1-2 hour a week	Never
	7	43	26	6	0
	8.5	52.4	31.7	7.3	0

Work in schools

Question 11.Use of computer in teaching

11.1 Is it possible for you to use computers in your school for teaching at the moment?	Yes	No
	77	5
	93.9	6.1

Question 12. Barriers to using computer in teaching

12.1 Are there any barriers to you using computers in your school at the moment?	Yes	No
	33	42
	40.2	51.2

- Short of equipment or equipment of reliable quality =25, 30.4%
- time limit (work load), n=3, 3.7%
- technical (support or suitable software application), n=2, 2.4%
- not suitable to the content, n=1, 1.2%
- personal reason, n=1, 1.2%

Question 13 Use the teaching aids?

How often do you use the following in your teaching? If you are using computers in your teaching now, how do you use them?		All the time	Freque ntly	Occa siona lly	Rarel y	Neve r	missi ng
Computer lab	n	28	34	13	6	0	1
	%	34.1	15.9	7.3	0	0	1.2
Internet	n	2	52	14	6	5	3
	%	2.4	63.4	17.1	7.3	6.1	3.7
Books	n	26	54	0	1	0	1
	%	31.7	65.9	0	1.2	0	1.2
Cassettes	n	8	66	0	6	1	0
	%	9.8	80.5	0	7.3	1.2	0
Images	n	4	53	21	2	0	2
	%	4.9%	64.6%	25.6 %	2.4%	0	0
Video	n	0	12	44	17	6	3
	%	0	14.67	53.7	20.7	7.3	3.7

13.7 Using computers in teaching

- courseware making and content displaying/presentation, n=63, 76.6%
- information search n=5, 6.1%
- use courseware to create activities involving students   n=3 3.7%

Question 14. Training and support at school to use computer in teaching

14.1 Does the school you work for provide training and support to you to use

14.1 Does the school you work for provide training and support to you to use computer in teaching?	Yes	No
n	77	4
%	93.9	4.9

The training and support the school provided for them were:

- Providing training in using computers, n= 46 (56.1%)
- Providing equipment, n= 36 (43.9%)
- Providing technical support, n=22 (26.8%)
- Allowing time off for training, n=1, 1.2%

14.2 Additional training and support needed to use computers in teaching

14.2 Do you require additional training and support to use computers in your teaching?	Yes	No
N	45	34
%	54.9	41.4

The extra training and support were mainly on:

- training in using software and making courseware, n=19, 23.2%
- providing regular and further training, n=11, 13.4%
- training in network technology related skills, n=9, 11.0%
- providing equipment, n=5, 6.1%
- training in pedagogy and educational theories for courseware making, n=1, 1.2%
- time allowance, n=1, 1.2%

15. 1 Previous experience of online or distant learning course

Have you attended any other online or distant learning course?	Yes	No	missing
	22	58	2
	26.8	70.7	2.4

The online or distant learning course being attended by the participants were:

- Intel future educational training (add reference), n=12, 14.6%
- BNU affiliated secondary school education website (reference), n=2, 2.4%

16 The main reasons for participating in the eChina modules

- learning new method to improve teaching n=51 62.2%
- self improvement, n=25 30.5%
- communication and exchanging, n=8, 9.8%
- experience of online, improve online learning skill, n=7, 8.5%
- improve English, n=6, 7.3%
- school authority requirement, n=6, 7.3%
- personal interests, n=4, 4.9%
- confidence on BNU and Manchester U, n=2, 2.4%
- flexible with time, n=1, 1.2%
- independent learning / self initiative learning, n=1, 1.2%
- for the qualification, n=1, 1.2%

17 Anticipated benefits of studying the eChina modules

- learning new approach to improve teaching quality/ability, n=47, 57.3%
- self improvement, n=12, 14.6%
- experiencing new way of learning, n=9, 11.0%
- interacting with others and experience sharing, n=8, 9.8%
- improving English, n=6, 7.3%
- improving self learning skills, n=2, 2.4%
- learning network technology and computer skills, n=2, 2.4%
- not sure yet, n=2, 2.4%

18 Concerns about following the eChina modules

- time limit / work lord, n= 31, 37.8%
- relevant (helpful) to practice, n=16, 19.5%

- English language, n=11 13.4%
- no experience of online learning, n=10, 12.2%
- level of difficult, n=9, 11.0%
- study load, n=7, 8.5%
- computer skills, n=6, 7.3%
- overall time too short to have full understanding of the material, n=5, 6.1%
- further and continuation of this study, n= 3, 3.7%
- effective communication, n=2, 2.4%
- on time feedback, n=2, 2.4%
- technical/equipment support/availability, n=1, 1.2%
- sufficient relevant learning resources/material, n=1, 1.2%
- online learning is not as effective as face-to-face learning, n=1, 1.2%
- gaining a of certificate, n=1, 1.2%

19 What training and support do you feel you need in order to take these modules?

- network technology and computers skills training, n=15, 18.3%
- providing relevant URL or other learning and teaching resources n=9, 11.0%
- support from school they work (time off, and flexible working time), n=8, 9.8%
- online learning method, n=7, 8.5%
- feedback and guidance from tutors, n=2, 2.4%
- English language training, n=2, 2.4%
- regular face-to-face tutorial, n=1, 1.2%

20 Please tell us if you have any other comments

- more and continued learning opportunities like this, n=3, 3.7
- providing more relevant information/case studies, n=3, 3.7%
- more face-2-face session, n=2, 2.4%
- more support from tutors, n=2, 2.4%
- providing modules in subject area teaching, n=2, 2.4

Appendix 3: WeSU Programme - Questionnaires for focus groups (Learner)

Name: _____   Position: _____

Part 1:

Questionnaire - Please tick or fill the blank space:

1. About the progress

Which modules are you work on?_____

How many units have you completed? _____

2. How many hours did you spend on each unit?

Unit 1.   _____

Unit 2._____

Unit 3._____

3. Where did you work on the materials (home, work or any other place)?

4. When did you usually work on the materials (morning, afternoon, evening, week days weekend)?

5. Did you mostly

read on screen ? _____

print the material out ?_____

6. Did you mostly work

download material? _____

work online ?_____

7. **How easy did you find it to use the modules and navigate around them**?

   (Please mark on the scale)

   Very difficult   Very easy

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

8. **How easy/difficult did you find the content? (**Please mark on the scale**)**

   Very difficult   Very easy

   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

9. **The suggested times for the tasks were usually:**

   a. **too short**_____
   b. **Just right** _____
   c. **too long**_____

10. **How useful/sufficient was your introduction to the programme?**

    Not useful   **very useful**

    12   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

11. **Would you recommend these modules to a friend or colleague?**

    Yes _____

    No   _____

12. What is your overall evaluation of the modules? (Please mark on the scale)

Low satisfaction   High satisfaction

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Appendix 4: WeSU Focus group with learners scripts

Question 1. Did you find the course useful?

1. How relevant was the material to your own practice?
2. How did the content of the materials meet with your expectations?
3. How useful/sufficient was the introduction to the programme?
4. How interesting and useful ?

Question 2. How did you find the learning approach?

1. How familiar were you with the approach to learning adopted in the modules – (did these give you any difficulties? Would you have preferred a different approach – if so what?)
2. What did you enjoy/find difficult/find useful about learning this way?

Question 3: How did you find about Reflection in learning?

1. How much has reflection being an important aspect of your professional or academic practice?
2. Did the activities make you think and reflect on the information and did it help you reflect on your own practice?
3. Was the recording of your ideas in a learning log helpful or would they prefer to just think about the ideas?
4. Did the materials enable you to think of ways to improve your own practice? If yes in what way, can you give an example?

Question 4: How did you find about Working with others?

5. Did you work through the materials on your own or with other students? If you worked with other students – did you do in pairs, online, in groups, etc?
6. Did the modules provide you with sufficient opportunities to work with and communicate with other students?

1. Did you use the discussion board and if so did you find it useful and why?
2. How was this experience different from/similar to talking about ideas face-to-face with colleagues?   (Did you find it more difficult or easier to share ideas online as opposed to f2f? and how?)

Question 5: What is your experience of Working through the materials and activities? How does this form of learning compare to face-to-face teaching?

1. Did you have any problems accessing the materials and if so what problems did you have? Access (difficulty/ease of use)
2. How did you find the overall organisation/structure of the modules i.e. how easy /useful did you find using the division of learning sections, unit learning objectives, task outcomes?
3. Did you use the video clips and if so what did you like/dislike about them?
4. How did you find the various activities in the modules, were they useful?
5. Was the staging of tasks into separate activities helpful or too prescriptive?
6. What did you think of the content of the modules – was it clear and easy to understand or interesting to work through?

Question 6: What do you think would be appropriate form of assessment?

1. Do you think these modules are appropriate for inclusion in a Masters programme, teacher training courses or stand along workshops?
2. Would you like to be able to gain a formal qualification from completing these modules?
3. What forms of assessment do you think would be appropriate

   - Self-assessment
   - Peer-review
   - Traditional essay
   - Portfolio of evidence
   - Examination
   - Multiple choice questions
   - Direct assessment of your teaching performance and the products of your teaching (materials produced, lesson plans, student work, student feedback, administration, assessment outlines, etc)
   - Viva
   - Interview
   - Other – please specify

Question 7: What do you think are the key advantage and disadvantage of the modules and this way of working?

1. What concerns do you have with these modules?
2. Is there anything you would like to feed back specifically about the modules which has not been covered here?

3. What if any do you think are the benefits of this approach to learning?
4. Is there sufficient and appropriate training and support available?
5. The developers are keen to take your feedback and improve the modules – what changes would you like to see in order to improve these modules?

Part 3*:*

Please let us know any other comment or recommendations you would like to make to the developers?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 5 JN Programme - Web-based questionnaire for learners (in Chinese)

评估问卷

第一部分：基本信息

1. 您现在_____学习中心

2. 你学习的专业是?_____

3. 今年是你就读该课程的_____?

    A. 第一年; B. 第二年; C. 第三年

4. 您是: _____

    A.男性;   B. 女性。

5. 您的年龄:_____

    A. 20 或以下; B. 21-30; C. 31-40; D. 41-50; E. 50 以上。

6.   您现在的工作状况:_____

    A. 有全职的工作; B. 兼职的工作; C 暂时不工作

第二部分：计算机/互联网 可适性及使用和技巧

7. 您能在下面那些场所使用计算机? （可多选）

    A.在家; B.在工作的地方; C.在学习中心; D. 其它地方：

请注明＿＿＿＿

8. 你能在下面那些场所连接到互联网？ （可多选）

　 A. 家; B.工作的地方; C.学习中心; D. 其它地方 （请注明————）

9．通常一周中你花多少小时使用计算机进行学习？ ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

(请选择所有适合的选项)

10.以下哪种交流的工具是您在网院学习中常用到的? **(请选择所有适合的选项)**

A. 电子邮件；

B. 电话/移动电话；

C. 网上学习讨论版； （比如课程论坛， 网院论坛）

D. 录像会议；导学录音； 讲座录像

E. 面对面的辅导，讨论；（与老师或同学之间的）

F. 即时短信(比如 MSN, QQ)

G. 虚拟学习空间（比如Interwise等）

10.1 在您选择的工具中，对你学习帮助最大的是————？（请选择最多三项）

10.2 有哪些交流工具，你现在没有用到，但是希望将来能用到学习类似的课程？

A. 电子邮件；

B. 电话/移动电话；

C. 网上学习讨论版；（比如课程论坛，网院论坛）

D. 录像会议；导学录音；讲座录像

E. 面对面的辅导，讨论；（与老师或同学之间的）

F. 即时短信(比如 MSN, QQ)

G. 虚拟学习空间（比如Interwise等

11 请读以下的陈述，并指出你在哪种程度上同意这些说法。

我能自信地：	同意	基本同意	不确定	不太同意	不同意
11.1 使用计算机					

11.2 使用互联网					
11.3 使用这个课程中要用到的科技					
11.4 进行在线学习					

第三部分：期望和动机

12.

在参加这个课程之前你是否参加过其他在线课程或远程教育课程的学习？	是	不是
如果是，请你简单地描述一下，这个课程是什么？你对这次学习经验的最深刻感受是什么？		

13. 你参加这个课程学习的主要原因和动机是：-------（请选择最多三个对你来说最主要的）

☐ A. 我对这个学科很感兴趣；

☐ B. 我想拿到这个文凭以帮助我今后的职业生涯；

☐ C.我想体验一下在线学习；

☐ D. 我想获得一些电脑方面的知识技术；

☐ E. 我想通过学习提高我的工作实践；

☐ F. 我想增长知识， 开阔眼界，提高自身素质修养。

☐ G. 我想向我自己和我的朋友证明我的能力。

☐ H. 我想拿到这个文凭以向更高的学术目标迈进。

☐ I. 其他。(请指明：---)

第四部分：对学习的理解

14. 学习对你来说意味着什么？当你说你学了新的东西，你指的是什么？

请仔细读以下的陈述， 并指出它们分别在哪种程度上接近你的想法。 每一行请选择一个答案。

学习意味着...	非常接近	很接近	不太接近	很不同	非常不同
14.1. 记住新的知识；					
14.2. 通过获取信息增长知识；					
14.3. 促进个人的发展；					
14.4. 能够运用你所有的生活经验；					
14.5. 能够把你所获取的信息运用到实践中；					

14.6. 理解新的材料，概念；					
14.7. 能把要做的事情做好；					
14.8. 从更深层次去看问题。					

15. 请问在哪种程度上你认为这个课程让你实现了真正意义上的学习？ 请选择一个数字代表程度。（数字越大表示程度越高）

很大程度上   一点也不

5   4   3   2   1

第五部分：课程和网络学习的经验

> **16.** 请根据你的经验立即给出答案， 尽量不要选择"不确定"，除非确实如此或问题不适合你的情况。

	同意	基本同意	不确定	不太同意	不 同意
16.1. 学习这个课程所要求使用的学习方法和我以前的不一样					
16.2. 这个课程强调掌握学科内容。					
16.3. 通过学习这个课程，我掌握的学习方法比课程内容本身更重要。					

	同意	基本同意	不确定	不太同意	不同意
16.4我更喜欢独立完成学习任务。					
16.5课程学习过程中，我可以和常常老师以及同学保持联络和互动。					
16.6在这个课程的学习过程中，我需要更多的自我导向。					
16.7辅导老师很负责，也很乐意帮忙。					
16.8辅导老师给出了详细的教学指导，关于该做什么以及怎么学。					
16.9. 在课程学习过程中，我感觉老师在不间断地观察,跟踪我们的学习。					
16.10我觉得我们像被抛在一边自己学习。					
16.11我感觉在课程学习中老师对我们的干预太多。					
16.12. 我觉得和老师的互动交流还是不够。.					
16.13. 老师给出的作业的评语和反馈对我很有帮助。					
16.14我觉得我可以提问题并且很快得到答复。					
16.15这个课程的学习目标老师已经很清楚地向我们阐释了。					
16.16. 我觉得和其他同学交					

	同意	基本同意	不确定	不太同意	不同意
流互动很有帮助。					
16.17．我从课程中学到的知识帮助我提高了工作效率。					
16.18．该课程鼓励我常常反思总结自己的学习经历。					
16.19我发现网络讨论区，校园论坛等对学习不太有帮助。					
16.20这种方式的学习增强了我对学习时间，地点的控制。					
16.21我喜欢被清晰的告知接下去要做什么和怎样做。					
16.22．希望对所学的内容和学习的方式，我能有更多的控制。					
	同意	基本同意	不确定	不太同意	不同意
16.23课程考试的方法帮助我学得更好。					
16.24．对我而言，课程的时间安排很合理。					
16.25．课程安排的学习任务太重了。					
16.26．即使我最后不能通过考试，这个课程的学习对我来说还是有意义的经验。					
16.27．技术问题有时使我不能专注于学习的内容。					
16.28．由于技术的问题，学习这个课程我需要更多的帮助。					
16.29我很怀念传统课程中的					

更多的面授。					
16.30. 我觉得网络课程还是不如传统课程。					
16.31. 我对参与这种新的学习方式感到兴奋。					
16.32. 我发现不难协调学习和生活中其他事情的关系。					
16.33. 我发现在线学习要花的时间比我预计的更多。					
16.34. 我想我能在网络课程环境下学得更好。					
16.35. 在在线学习环境中,比较难得知我具体要做什么。					
16.36. 能否通过考试是我在这个课程学习中最主要的考虑。.					
16.37. 如果有机会,我会很愿意参加另一个类似的网络课程的学习。					
16.38. 如果这个课程是用传统方式教的,我可能会学得更开心一些。					

17. 在以下的选项中, 哪一些是对你的学习最有帮助的? (请选择最多三项)

(   )

A. 课程介绍 (开篇导学等);

B. 课程的材料。

C. 讲座直播，实时导学。

D. 与老师的交流，互动。

E. 和其他同学的合作交流。

F. 自己个人的努力。

G. 其它， 请注明--

18．在学习过程中你是否经历了以下的困难？ 请选择所有适合的选项

（   ）

A. 学习的场所不够安静。

B. 没有个人的电脑。

C. 互联网花费太高，特别是在家上网的时候。

D. 没有方便的打印机可用。

E. 网络不是太稳定。

F. 在课程网页上找不到相关的信息。

G. 当出现了技术问题时，没有人在周围能帮助我。

H. 作业不能得到老师及时的反馈。.

I. 和老师没有充分有效的交流。

J. .工作太忙，没有足够的时间学习。

K. 感到孤独，和同课程其他同学交流不够。

L. 感到被疏远，某种程度上不属于大学这个集体。

M. 课程内容太难，很难跟得上

N. 评估测评的方式不合理。

O. 其它，请指出：--------------------------------

19. 通过这次学习经历，你觉得网络课程（在线学习）有哪些优缺点？哪些是让你愉快的学习经历？哪些你觉得还很困难？

20．你希望能得到哪些帮助使你在这课程中学得更好？

21. 最后，如果你还有其他的意见和想法，请在这里告诉我。

非常感谢你完成这个问卷！

作为我研究的一部分，我希望能一些学习者进行采访 （面对面或者电话形式）。如果您愿意接受我的采访，将会是对我莫大的帮助，采访的内容会保证机密，不会透露给第三方。同样，采访可以选择您方便的形式，时间和地点。如果您愿意和我进一步合作，接受我的采访，请在这里留下你的联系方式。

姓名:_____ 电邮:_____ 联系电话:_____

再次向您表示诚挚的谢意

李真

英国南安普顿大学教育学院

电邮：zl@soton.ac.uk

办公电话：+44 23 8059 8939

Appendix 6 JN Programme - Learners' interview schedule

学生个别访问草案

简介：

首先，非常感谢您抽出宝贵的时间来参加这个访问。这个访问是我和南京大学合作的一项关于了解和评估中国学员参加网络课程学习的经验的调查研究的一个重要部分。主要想和您一起谈谈一下您的学习经历。 我们谈话的所有内容都是保证机密的。 所有信息都会采用匿名的方式写在任何形式的报告中。所以，请不要顾虑说出您真实地感受和想法。这个访问大概会维持 45 分钟-1 小时。 有些问题如果需要稍微思考一下，不用急于回答。如果您不介意的话，我将会对访问的内容录音。

我们现在可以开始了吗？（录音：日期，时间，地点，被采访人姓名）

第一部分：总的回顾

（让我们对课程先做一个大概的，总的回顾，好吗？）

1. 您是否还记得您当初为什么选择读这个课程？您主要想从这个课程的学习中得到什么呢？
2. 目前为止，您感觉课程的学习是否合乎您的期望？ 课程进展是否象您期望的那样？（如果不是，哪些方面？为什么？）
3. 什么是让您最愉快的学习经历？
4. 对你来说，最主要的困难来自哪些方面？对这些困难，您有没有得到一些相应的支持和帮助？

第二部分：课程学习的反思

（接下来，让我们一起回顾一下您具体的学习过程）

1. 课程的设计
（1） 您觉得课程对你们提出的主要要求是什么？具体说来，就是说课程要求您具体做些什么？学好这个课什么是最重要的事？
（2） 课程都设置了哪些学习的活动和安排？ 您是否都参与？哪些您觉得有用？哪些没有？

（3） 您对考试测评的方法有什么想法？ 是否合理？对你的学习有帮助吗？
（4） 学习讨论区
    a) 您常去网院学习讨论区吗？为什么？（常去或不常去的原因）
    b) 你觉得这种形式的交流对学习是否有帮助？抑或您更倾向于其他的形式？
    c) 如果您觉得学习讨论区在网络课程中很有必要，您觉得怎样可以使它更有效？

2．课程内容和学习的方法
（1） 您对课程内容是否满意？为什么？对课程内容，您是否有一定自由度选择？您觉得这个是否重要？您是否希望您能有更多的选择？）
（2） 您觉得现在在这个课程的学习所用的方法和您以前的学习经历有什么不同？这些不同对你的学习产生了哪些影响？您是否选择合适自己的学习方法来进行学习的？（您觉得如果老师能给予更多更清晰的指导，告诉你怎样学会更好？）

3．教师的角色
（1） 您对课程辅导老师怎么看？ 专业知识丰富？ 认真负责？
（2） 您觉得教师是否是阐释教材内容的权威？
（3） 您期望老师在学习过程中对您给出哪些方面的辅导？实际上是这样的吗？在哪些方面他（她）对你给出了帮助？
（4） 现在和老师的交流和互动您觉得是否能满足您学习的需要？您是否期望和老师有更多的接触？ 通过什么形式？

4．同学交流
（1） 你觉得同学之间的交流是否必要？
（2） 你和同学之间都有哪些交流？哪种形式？
（3） 您是否被要求这样做抑或是你们自发的？对你的学习有帮助吗？
（4） 您是否常去网院学习讨论区？它对你的学习是否有帮助？ 在哪种程度上？

5．教育科技的运用
（1） 你是否运用各种可及帮助你学习？如果是，有哪些？你是怎么用他们的？
（2） 将来你希望那些教育科技可以怎样帮助你学习？

6．学习的独立性和创造性以及反思
（1） 您觉得独立和自主在这个课程学习中是否重要？在哪些方面？
（2） 在课程学习过程中，您是否被鼓励将学到的知识运用于实践中？是否有这样的机会让你反思怎么样通过学习更好的提高你的工作效率？

第三部分 总结和建议

1. 通过您这次的经验，您觉得网络课程学习的优缺点是什么？
2. 在网络课程环境中，你会怎么定义"有效的学习"？学习者应具备哪些条件才能在网络课程中学的更好？
3. 您觉得这个课程哪些方面还可以更好？您有什么建议？

最后，你还有什么其它的意见和想法吗？

Learners' interview schedule *(English translation)*

Introduction:

Hi, thank you for your time to do this interview. It's part of my research of evaluating students' online learning experience. In this interview, I would like to talk with you about your personal experience of studying on this course. All the content of our talking will be kept confidential and reported anonymous. So please feel free to speak your real thoughts. The interview will be recorded if you don't mind and it will last about 1 hour.

Part I Review (Expectations, beliefs and motivations)

1. What are your main reasons taking part in the course? What did you expect to get out of the course before you started?
2. Was it better or worse than you expected? /To what extent do you think the course meet you expectation so far?/ Do you think it went how you thought it would? If no, how do you think went differently?
3. What are the most enjoyable learning activities in the learning process?
4. What are the main difficulties? What support have you had?

Part II Reflection of course study

1. Role of course design and delivery

- How do you perceive the course demand? What are the most important things you have been asked to do to succeed in the course? (What are you expected to do during the learning process? Was that what you are actually doing?)
- Did the form of assessment help you learning? Why?

- Discussion Forum
    1) How did you find about 'discussion forum'? Is it helpful? Or which form of communication do you prefer?
    2) What factors motivated or constrained you to participate?
    3) Do you think you need some specific training to learn to use it?

2. *Role of content*

- Are you happy about the content given to learn? How much choice and control do you have over the content and method of studying? Do you think that is important for you?

3. *Role of tutor*

- How competent and well-prepared do you find the tutors are in the course?

- What did you expect the lecturer/tutor to do in the learning process? How did the lecturer/ tutor actually act? In which way did s/he help you? Did it meet your need and expectations?
- Was the interaction with tutor sufficient? Do you want more personal support from tutors? If so, in which form?

4. *Peer collaboration*

- Do you think it is necessary to collaborate with other students in the learning process?
- Is there any collaboration with other students happening in your study? In which form? (face-to-face, online or telephone etc)
- Have you been asked to do so? Or you were doing it spontaneously?
- Do you find it helpful to your study?

5. *Role of technologies*

- Did you use any technologies to help you learn in your study? What and how?

- How would you like technologies to help your learning in the future?

6. *Independent learning/autonomy/creativity/reflection*

- How do you understand 'being an independent learner' in the course study?
- To what extent and in which aspects do you wish to be independent in the course learning process?
- Have you come cross the term like 'creativity' and 'reflection'? Is there any learning activities encouraging you to do so?

Part III Reflection of on-line learning

1. What are the differences you have found of this online learning experience from your previous learning experiences? How did you cope with them?
2. What are the advantages/disadvantages to you of learning on-line?
3. What do you perceive as 'effective learning' online? Is there any difference from learning in traditional course?
4. From your experience, what learning strategies do you perceive as important in an online course?
5. What suggestions you would like make to improve the course?

Closing questions:

Do you have any other comments or suggestions you would like to make of your online learning experience?