From textbook to e-learning: The real challenge – Job interview skills in English

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Abstract

E-learning provides great potential for both students and teachers. This paper reports on the outcomes of an online course on job-seeking skills. A traditional ‘chalk, board and talk’ course on job-seeking skills was transformed into an interactive e-learning programme that combines text, graphics, animation, video clips, narration, and interactive elements to create a virtual classroom.

The rationale of this online job seeking skills programme is to enhance students’ learning in three ways: by providing a more effective and stimulating learning environment; by promoting self-access study and collaborative learning; and by encouraging the planning of learning strategies and higher-order thinking. It also caters to the different needs and levels of the learners and encourages students to contribute to virtual discussions.

Post-course evaluation shows that students generally welcomed or accepted the idea of online learning. They reported that the virtual classroom had extended their learning horizons and enhanced their learning experience to varying degrees, while minimising the constraints of time.

Keywords

E-learning, job interview skills, evaluation.

Why e-learning?

E-learning enables students to learn outside a physical classroom (Sanders 2001). The student-centred learning environment provided by e-learning offers students flexibility of learning pace, different entry levels to the content and opportunities to interact with content. It also encourages self-assessment and communication among class members and with the instructor. From the perspective of the students, e-learning is all about freedom of choice (Fang 1999). While students can now take charge of planning their learning strategies according to their own preferences and learning styles, they are faced with challenges such as having to build strong self-discipline and develop effective learning strategies. They have to learn and get used to the idea of ‘learning on their own’ as well as learning how to collaborate with classmates. Sanders (op. cit.) believes that e-learning can produce considerable benefits in respect of learners’ satisfaction and personal development.
The course

A job-seeking skills course for third-year Engineering students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, *The real challenge* – Interview skills in English, usually delivered in a traditional ‘board, chalk and talk’ manner, was transformed into an e-learning mode, using the Web-based software, *Learning Space*. The online version is composed of ten day-units. Except for an initial meeting and two assessment tasks which involved presentations and mock interviews, the course was delivered entirely online. Its main features include:

- online interactive multimedia presentations;
- online reference resources and supplementary materials for the topic of the day;
- discussion forums for students and instructors;
- animated and interactive exercises with instant feedback;
- video excerpts of different phases of job interviews;
- assessed tasks with links to templates, job advertisements and assessment criteria; and
- post-course evaluation.

A demonstration course can be viewed at:

Course evaluation

The pilot course was delivered in January 2001, involving four classes of 18 students each. At the end of the course, students were asked to participate in a study to evaluate their virtual classroom learning experience. The major research tool employed in this study was an online post-course questionnaire, which aimed to determine whether the course had enabled the participants to achieve the learning objectives set out at the beginning of the course. Thirty-eight participants (53%) completed the questionnaire.

Apart from the questionnaire, course participants were invited to take part in a one-hour focus group four weeks after the course, to discuss in greater depth some of the issues raised in the online course evaluation. Four discussions were held, with each group consisting of six to eight participants.

The following presents selected findings from the questionnaire and the subsequent discussion.

Findings

*Learners’ evaluations of their own learning*

Section 1 of the questionnaire focused on the effectiveness of the course. The results can be grouped according to three main areas of learning: students’ awareness of their own qualities and the criteria used in job interviews (Q1 & 5), job interview skills (Q3, 4 & 6) and writing skills: résumés & application letters (Q2).

As shown in Table 1, students in general responded positively to the course. In all of the three learning areas, a majority of the students (62.2% – 73.7%) either strongly agreed or agreed that the course had improved their abilities and skills.
Table 1: Effectiveness of the course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The course has improved my ability to match my qualities with job requirements.</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The course has developed my skills in writing résumés and job application letters that ‘sell’.</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The course has helped me develop the skills in preparing myself adequately for job interviews.</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The course has helped me develop appropriate strategies in handling difficult questions at an interview.</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The course has raised my awareness of some common criteria used in evaluating performance in a job interview.</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The course has helped me develop and practise the skills necessary for effective job interviews.</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(n = 38)

In particular, relatively more (34.2%) students felt strongly that the course had raised their awareness of common criteria used in job interviews (Q2), and developed their skills in writing résumés and job applications (Q5). Comparatively, they felt less sure about their skills in handling difficult questions (Q4), which involved more advanced skills. Relatively fewer respondents (16.2%) agreed strongly that the course had helped them develop appropriate strategies in this respect, whereas some (10.8%) of them did not agree that they had been adequately prepared.

**Quantity and quality of learners’ participation**

The quantity of learner participation was reflected in the amount of time students spent on the reading, discussion and reflection tasks. Over 80% of the students reported that they spent around 1.5 to two hours a day on the course, and about 10% spent well over two hours.

The issue of quality was discussed in the focus groups. Students were asked if they would have devoted the same, less or more effort to the course if it had been delivered in class face to face. A clear majority maintained that they did more thinking before responding online, partly because the responses were written and public, and partly because they had more time; whereas in class, an instant response is expected and very often they would respond without thinking thoroughly.

**Reflection on the learning experience**

In response to the question, “What do you like about this online course?”, three reasons stood out clearly: convenience, interactivity and flexibility. Below is a representative quotation:

> It is easier for me to know the whole schedule of the course and what I have to do clearly than attending classes in classrooms as I can always refer to the materials on the Web. Time control is also better because we can follow the schedule more tightly by learning online. Besides, it is flexible as I can read and learn the materials on other days at any time. It also saves time in travelling to school to attend the lessons.

The major complaint from the students who responded to “What do you dislike about this online course?” was the heavy workload. Students all said that they had expected a lighter than normal...
classroom workload when they had heard that the course was to be delivered online and thus, some felt being cheated when they realised that they had to participate in discussions and write something every day.

**Discussion**

One of the objectives of the design of this online course was to minimise the constraints of time, felt by both students and teachers, in a traditional classroom. A large proportion of students on the course felt that they were in control of their learning, and they reported more flexibility in time and freedom of choice in terms of deciding when and how much to learn. The findings also provide evidence that students spent more time reading the materials, participating in online forum discussions and doing the reflective tasks than a face-to-face course would usually have allowed.

A major emphasis of this online course is to encourage students to develop a critical, self-reflective approach to learning, and to develop a deep level of communication with both the instructor and fellow students. In this regard, the course has been partially successful, as a majority of students said they spent time on the reflection tasks, which require some reflective and critical thinking about themselves and the job requirements. However, when it came to providing constructive criticisms to fellow classmates, the result was quite disappointing. Student contributions to the online forum indicated that there were very few attempts at giving feedback to others. Most students just did their fair share of homework. Some read their classmates’ work but rarely provided any comments. Further work is required to gain insights into this area.

The students of this course agreed that self-discipline, time management skills and computer skills were essential in pursuing an online course. Other factors that had been identified as conducive to online learning were: easy access to learning materials, appropriate inclusion of audio and video clips, clear instructions, and suitable timing of the course (offered in the Winter session when students are less busy). Factors identified by the students as hindering learning online were all technology-related, such as “bandwidth”, “slow server”, and “no software to view video files at home”. These factors were particularly problematic for students who lived off-campus.

While feedback from this online course was generally positive, online learning was definitely not every student’s preferred learning mode. Although many students opined that online learning was effective, the more articulate often preferred face-to-face learning for more instructor/student interaction. While students valued the flexibility and freedom an online course provided, most felt the absence of face-to-face contact with a teacher. Only a few students said they were thrilled to have “no one to lead them by the nose”, but many preferred to have a teacher in class so that they “can ask teacher questions any time in class”.

**Conclusion**

Feedback from this online course has been encouraging, and students reported that the virtual classroom had extended their learning horizons and enhanced their learning experience to varying degrees, while minimising the constraints of time.

The development of an online course requires expertise in many areas including instructional design, information management and access, multimedia design and integration, evaluation, maintenance and project management. The writers in this project have benefited from working in a team, with specialist support. Few language teachers are skilled in both technology and pedagogy and it is, therefore, important to be able to adjust to working with different professionals on course design and contents.
Note

1. Other than taking *The real challenge* module online, the students also worked simultaneously on a *Business letters* module, which had daily face-to-face meetings in the afternoon throughout the ten days.

References
