Teacher training in China and a practical model: e-Training Community (eTC)

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to introduce the overall situation of online teacher training in China, and then to analyze some typical state level e-training projects; second, to describe the problems that most teacher training agencies (TTAs) have. Also, this article presents the background, process and achievement of a practical model – e-Training Community (eTC) – which integrates the advantages of professional organizations and TTAs.

Design/methodology/approach – This article reviews literature related to Ministry of Education (MOE) policies and general reviews or reports about China's teacher e-training. The case study approach is applied in this study. The e-Training Community is a particular cooperative model developed by the Distance Education College of East China Normal University. A survey and interview are applied to gain deep understanding of this model.

Findings – E-learning is an effective way for teacher education in China to meet the challenge of massive and routine training. The recent projects initiated by MOE show that the trend of e-training is on the right track. However, China's teacher e-training still has a long way to go because most TTAs still do not have the ability to implement e-training by themselves. The eTC model presented in this article shows its strength in solving this problem.

Practical implications – The development of distance education needs professional guidance. How to integrate professional strength of universities and practical strength of local agencies is key to improving the overall quality of teacher e-training.

Originality/value – This article introduces and analyzes the eTC model, which is a creative model in the field of distance education in China. This model is a good example for professional organizations to push the e-learning practice.

Keywords Distance learning, Education colleges, Training, Teachers, Communities, China

Paper type General review

Background: teacher training in China

Teacher training plays an important role for the improvement of education in China. In 1999, the Rules for K12 Teachers' Continuing Education were published through the Decree (Issue No. 7) of the MOE, in which lifelong learning was counted as a right as well as an obligation for teachers. In order to meet the requirement of Education Reform, the MOE issued a five-year training plan to guide the training of all in-service teachers in the last two decades (Ministry of Education, 1999). Take the 10th Five-Year (2003-2007) Training Plan (Ministry of Education, 2002) as an example: the MOE organized and implemented 1,000 rural backbone teachers' training; organized and implemented one million K12 school teachers' training; supported 2,000 K12 school teachers to meet the standard requirement of teachers' educational levels; and implemented 1,000 backbone teachers' training (except rural teachers).

Based on the training plan, the Provincial Education Committees are in charge of local training programs (Zhang, 2005). The five-year teacher training plan has been

implemented in four rounds (totaling 20 years), and the 11th five-year training plan (from 2008 to 2013) is now in progress.

Although teacher training has laid a solid foundation for the development of Chinese education, it has some problems. First, the time conflict between working and training becomes more critical. The teacher training model trends to be more experience-oriented and process-oriented rather than originally knowledge-oriented and result-oriented. Following such a trend, the training time becomes comparatively longer than before (Yan and Bei, 2007). More training time and less working time make the time conflict between working and training more severe for K12 teachers. Almost all training programs are conducted in teachers' leisure time, such as weekends and holidays. Many K12 teachers complain about this. According to the questionnaire results of NanHui (a district of Shanghai) participants (totaling 369 K12 teachers) before training, 44 percent participants aimed to increase their credit hours and 11 percent of participants just took the training as their schools' assignment; only 26 percent of participants aimed to improve their ability in instruction.

Second, the expectation for training quality becomes higher. The training content needs to be updated and trainers' competence needs to be gradually improved too. During the period of the eighth to the tenth five-year plans, K12 teachers experienced many different training methods so that their expectations of training methods and content became heightened.

Third, traditional training ideas gave insufficient guidance to teachers. The global education reform calls for student-centered and process-oriented instruction. However, many teacher training programs still stay on the traditional stage which takes delivering lectures as the main method. K12 teachers nowadays need specific guidance on improving their practical wisdom rather than academic knowledge (Ding, 2008).

E-training: the current situation

The 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was held in 2007. The congress report points out that the nation should develop online education and continuing education, to build a learning society in which all people learn and pursue life-long education.

State level e-training projects

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the MOE started to pilot teacher training through the internet. However, most of the training programs in the first few years were not very successful in terms of training quality. With the accumulation of experience, some e-training programs gradually began to succeed. Here, this article introduces briefly three typical e-training projects launched by the MOE. Comparatively, the design and management of these projects are more mature, and their effectiveness is better.

National training for 10,200 class teachers. Class Teacher Training was a focus in 2007. Both "State Level 200 Senior Class Teacher Training" and the "10,000 Class Teachers e-Training Project" started in November 2007. According to the post-training investigation, these two training programs were very successful. The following features contributed to the success:

- all the chief trainers were very professional, and delivered truly excellent lectures to participants; and
- lectures were delivered face-to-face at the state-level senior class teacher training.

At the same time, those lectures were recorded and uploaded to the website (see: http://subject.teacher.com.cn/default.htm) for other 10,000 class teachers to view. It was shown that this design was effective. Online discussions followed each lecture. Those senior class teachers became assistant tutors in the discussions.

National New Course Workshop for Backbone Headteachers. The first National New Course Workshop began in October, 2006. This workshop was held by the MOE, and undertaken by East China of Normal University (ECNU). Until now, this workshop has been repeated eight times. More than 400 headteachers have benefited from the workshops.

The workshop was conducted in a blended training approach, i.e. face-to-face training plus online reflections. The participants reflected and communicated through a weblog (see: http://blog.cersp.com/2006yx1/yx1.htm). The use of weblogs for reflections forced the participants to make more effort and involve higher-order thinking.

Standard-based training in technology for teachers: pilot e-training. In 2004, the MOE published the Educational Technology Standards for Primary and Secondary Teachers, which was the first officially published standard on teachers' professional development in China. Given that over ten million K12 teachers have to reach the standard within five years, it is impossible to accomplish the project relying only on face-to-face training. Thus a blended training strategy is adopted. The Distance Education College (DEC) of ECNU provides the platform (see: http://jsjy.dec.ecnu.edu.cn) and learning support for the pilot e-training. Using well designed online courses, the pilot e-training was tried out with over 300 in-service teachers from various provinces.

The online course had the following features. It was well designed by experienced experts and their teams, which integrated meaningful contents and effective activities. Also, all the activities were designed for participant-centered training; and the whole training was task-driven. In addition, all the tutors in the pilot e-training were professionals. Their guidance for the participants was persuasive and helpful.

Analysis: trends of e-training

Compared to previous e-training, which just uploaded digital resources to the website so that participants could learn those resources randomly, the above projects present some important trends of e-training:

- *Paying great attention to content design.* The design of the online courses focused more on content quality. More experts or professional bodies were involved in improving the content quality.

- *Enriching online interaction through different activities.* One of the instructional goals of e-training is to promote higher-level thinking. Online interaction is necessary. Almost all the e-training courses involved online activities, such as discussions, group assignments, pair-and-share, and case studies.

- *Focusing on process assessment.* Previous e-training involved simple process assessment by counting login duration. At present, rubrics or checklists for discussions, reflections, and homework are heavily involved in process assessment.

Thinking: how to meet the challenges of TTAs

The projects mentioned above present the pinnacle of e-training in China. However, large scale e-training practice in China still encounters obstacles. This section analyses the challenges of TTAs, and argues that eTC can be a practical solution to those challenges.

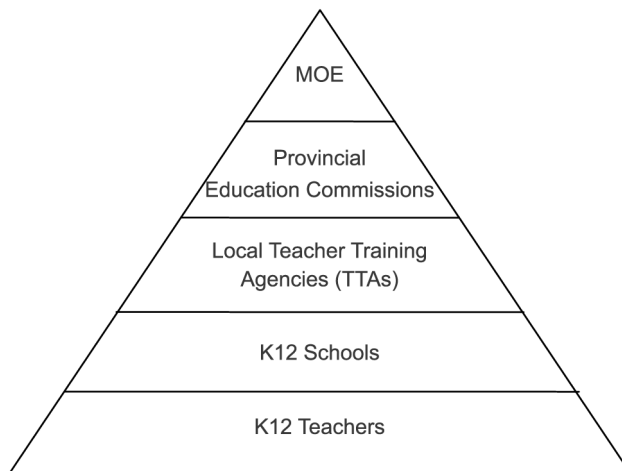### The teacher training system in China

The teacher training system in China is like a pyramid, as shown in Figure 1. At the top of the pyramid, the MOE is in charge of policy making, macro management, and state-level senior teacher training projects. Provincial education commissions, under the MOE's supervision, carry out similar functions but within the provincial scope. Local TTAs are responsible for most teacher training tasks. In addition, K12 schools implement school-based training for their teachers. School-based training is under the supervision of TTAs.

Due to the massive demand for K12 teacher training, the former closed pyramid system has to be more open. The teacher training university starts to play a more important role in K12 teacher training. However, the university can only be an advisory and cooperative associate of different level administration authorities. The university has no administrative authorities over any element of the teacher training system.
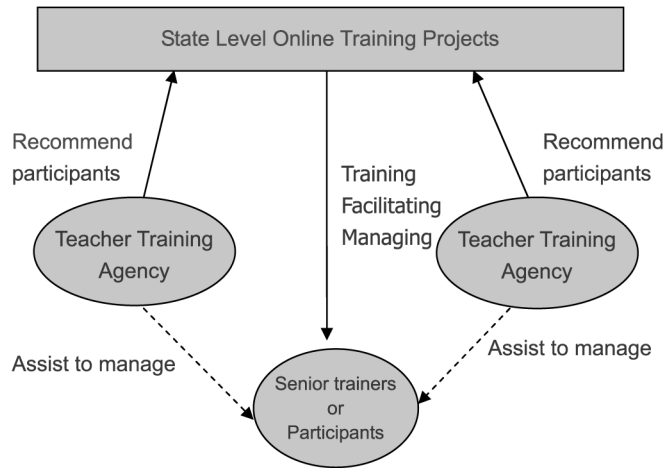
Problems still not solved by state level e-training projects

In the context of state-level training, TTAs play an assistant role. They recommend proper participants to the MOE and assist in certain management functions, as shown in Figure 2. They have to possess the following preconditions if they want to implement e-training independently:

- *Sufficient online resources*. TTAs used to shoulder independently most responsibilities for teacher training. However, their training pressures are gradually increasing due to higher training requirements. A majority of TTAs lack training resources.

Figure 1.
Teacher training system
in China

State Level Online Training Projects

Recommend participants

Training Facilitating Managing

Recommend participants

Teacher Training Agency

Teacher Training Agency

Assist to manage

Assist to manage

Senior trainers or Participants

Figure 2.
TTAs play assistant roles in state-level projects

- *A platform with high usability.* A platform with high usability requires not only financial support, but also rich experience and detailed design.
- *Professional managers for e-training projects.* Managing e-training projects is quite different from managing face-to-face training projects. An excellent teacher in a face-to-face setting may not function well in an online environment. Many questions need to be addressed, such as how to design an online project, and how to assess online tutors, etc.
- *Professional tutors for e-training projects.* Most TTAs have their own staff who train K12 teachers in a face-to-face setting. Most members of staff are capable of delivering instructional content to participants but lack facilitation skills, which are critical for online tutors or moderators (Wang, 2008).

The above elements are important for an e-training project to be successful. Unfortunately, almost all the state-level projects trained senior trainers or participants, rather than improving TTAs' abilities directly. Without professional guidance, some TTAs may fail when they implement pilot e-training.

eTC: a practical cooperation model for TTAs' e-training
From the end of 2003, the DEC has began to take charge of some teacher e-training projects, with the support of high-quality resources of ECNU, rich experience and a professional team on distance education. These projects have been highly acknowledged by cooperative TTAs.

As a professional research institution, the DEC is unable to conduct training directly due to limited human resources and the lack of administration authority. In order to build a cooperative relationship between the DEC and TTAs, a sound cooperation has to set up between the two sides.

The DEC has many advantages over TTAs, such as successful practice and mature management, having a platform with high usability, and updated online resources and a professional research team, whereas TTAs have advantages over the DEC in administrative authorities and human resources.

The idea to build the e-Training Community (eTC) was initiated at the end of 2005. The local TTA of Shenyang, a city in Northeast China, became the first member of eTC. After three years of cooperation, eTC has been an effective way to develop cooperation between a professional institution and TTAs.

Implementing: how to operate in the eTC model

In the eTC model, the TTA has to get qualification authentication from the DEC at the preparing period. Some preconditions have to be satisfied.

The eTC candidate has to prepare a persuasive long-term scheme to implement e-training for K12 teachers in its area. It should recommend at least three managers and 100 tutors to take part in related training organized by the DEC. Those managers and tutors earn certificates after they have successfully completed the training. If an eTC candidate has a qualified manager and ten qualified tutors, it will become a member of the eTC, called a cooperative TTA ("CTTA" for short).

The DEC and the CTTA will design the first three to five e-training projects together. The DEC designs all administrative documents and supervises the whole process of the first training session. Gradually, the CTTA will become more capable and its manager and tutors should localize the documents. At the same time, the supervision will decrease gradually.

In the implementation stage, the CTTA is the main body of the e-training. It selects online courses, engages tutors and managers, organizes participants, and supports the learning process. The DEC forwards supporting documents and professional guidance to the CTTA and organizes annual enrichment workshops for managers and tutors for the CTTAs.

Achievement: what's the result of the eTC

The DEC has built the eTC with three CTTAs (i.e. ShenYang, Jiaxing, and Zhoushan), and six additional TTAs are in the process of member qualification authentication.

As a member of the eTC, a CTTA can benefit from the eTC model. It can:

- increase the teacher training level, and avoid repeated low-level training;
- save an enormous sum of money on developing a platform and online courses;
- have a good start on e-training to relieve K12 teachers' time conflict between working and training; and
- develop an e-training system and human resources quickly with the support of professional guidance.

CTTA becomes a mature e-training agency in a short time

The CTTAs had no prior experience in e-training. Without the support of the eTC, it is hard for them to implement successful e-training. Now, they can do this in a short time after the cooperation with the DEC. Take ShenYang, the first CTTA, as an example: it trained 8,268 people successfully after it became a member of eTC.

The Shenyang TTA is one of the main K12 teacher training agencies in ShenYang. It undertakes continuing education for senior schoolteachers and principals in ShenYang. In order to improve training quality and meet different requirements of participants, the Shenyang TTA began to consider the e-training method. However, the leaders of the Shenyang TTA knew little about e-training. After serious investigation, the Shenyang TTA decided to be a member of the eTC. In June 2008, it became the first

member of the eTC. The Shenyang TTA has implemented e-training for 1,500 K12 teachers with 20 online courses provided by the DEC.

Managers and tutors become professionals

There are more than eight e-training managers and 40 tutors in these three CTTAs. They are used to being good managers and teachers in the face-to-face setting. With the support of the DEC, they have become professionals in e-training.

Zhong Jingjing, a good class teacher in the ZhouShan TTA, was really scared when she was assigned to be a future manager of e-training. Even after taking part in the manager training workshop organized by the DEC, she still felt upset. However, after the DEC professionals helped her with the management of the first e-training in ZhouShan, she found it was not that difficult to qualify. Now, she has become a qualified e-training manager with many creative ideas.

Some tutors come from K12 schools. With the support of training and guidance, they managed to change their roles quickly. Also, this experience gives them new ideas on their own class. Chen ZhuiXue, a tutor of ZhouShan TTA, is also a primary school teacher. She is now thinking about how to integrate online teaching into her daily instruction.

Conclusion

E-training is a current trend in K12 teacher education. The eTC is a practical model to combine the strength of universities and local TTAs together. The achievement is obvious. Nevertheless, further work needs to be carried out.

First, it is critical to provide professional development for tutors. Although some tutors are qualified for facilitation, they still need to improve their professional knowledge. Since there are comparatively fewer tutors in a CTTA, one tutor may be required to facilitate three to five courses in one semester, which means the tutor has to prepare different courses in a limited time frame. The DEC will help the CTTAs to cultivate more tutors in the future.

Second, the DEC will help to set up a higher quality expectation for CTTAs. The expectation of some CTTAs for e-training is not high. Some of them are satisfied with the online discussion and participants' positive feedback. They are not concerned much with the effectiveness of the training. In order to solve the problem, the DEC plans to cultivate one or two good training samples for CTTAs to learn from.

Third, the DEC is going to build an online course sharing system. So far, no CTTA has the ability to develop online courses alone. The course resources are solely provided by the DEC. In the future, the DEC plans to develop more training courses for CTTAs to improve their abilities in course design and development. The DEC hopes some CTTAs can develop online resources to enrich the online course database in the future as well.

Compared to the state-level e-training projects, the eTC model has interrelated advantages. It pushes TTAs to increase their abilities in e-training. Also, TTAs and professional institutions complement each other and build a real community. This model makes use of the best advantage of each part. Currently the DEC is piloting the eTC model in China. We hope that this model can also be adopted and improved by other professional institutions and TTAs in the future.

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