

To Be An E-tutor or Not To Be An E-tutor

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Abstract: - The dropout rate in distance education is much higher than in face-to-face education. This shows that dropout is an important issue in distance education. From distance e-tutor activities, teachers' reflection of their teaching on their blog, as well as the interview of each participated teacher, and experiences sharing meeting, this study identify three phases of the teacher's forming the sense of solicitude before their dropout of the online program. By point out this solicitude and it process, this study will provide some ponderable issues for ameliorate distance education.

Key-Words: - Dropout, Distance education, E-tutor activity, Rural area education, Preservice teacher

1 Introduction

Because of the development of computer and Internet, distance education becomes more and more popular. It is believed that the greatest advantage of distance learning is the capability to break through the constraints of space and time. Therefore, people who can not go to school regularly during work time could also acquire the knowledge they need by this way [1-2]. Even more, some educational resources which can not be obtained easily by the rural area people could be shared to those students who are really in need. Because of this advantage, an increasing number of educational institutions adopted the distance learning as one of way to provide their instruction [3].

Although distance learning has a lot of advantages, there is one shortage appeared in distant educational setting. It is the issue of higher dropout rate of the participants in distance education. As compare to the traditional face-to-face instruction, it is obvious that the high turnover rate will be the critical factor that affects the public's acceptance of distance education. Hence, in this study, the dropout of the participants in distance learning will be discussed.

In order to understand online secondary teacher's feeling about their teaching, and the transformation of their attitude toward teaching online and their invisible students, this study analyze the dropout of participated teachers in distance learning from a distance e-tutor activities, those teachers' reflection dairies on the blog, interview, and teaching experiences sharing meeting. The main focus of this study is to identify what happened before an online teacher drops out of the distance education.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Status Quo of Rural Area Education

The difficulties that most remote district schools have encountered including: the shortage of willing teachers, finance support, and the communities support. In Taiwan the allocation of educational resources is based on the number of the students a school has. However, the common and significant features of rural schools are that they are small,

have a few students. Accordingly, the school will not hire many teachers, and those teachers are always in charge of not only teaching the students but also many annoying administrative works.

Besides, these rural area schools are usually not easily to be accessed, and the teachers who are don't live near by, therefore, have to spend a lot of time on commuting [4]. These factors resulted in less and less qualified teachers have intention to teach in countryside and finally, led to the inferior learning performance of rural area students. According to the concept of equality of educational opportunities, the government must provide equal educational resources to each student regardless of the existence of social, racial, economic, and geographic barriers [5-6]. Yet it is not easy to provide really equal educational opportunities for every student when giving traditional face to face instruction.

By means of distance education, the teachers don't have to go to rural area physically and also could provide their service to the students. Moreover, the students can obtain more fresh information and rich learning material when learning online. The researcher assumed the distance education will ameliorate the educational difficulties of rural area school if the dropout issue could be solved.

2.2 Dropout in Distance Education

There are many reasons that will cause the dropout in distance education. Actually, the dropout rate is much higher than in face-to-face education. In some institutions the dropout rate higher than 40% [7]. This shows that the dropout in distance education is a very important issue.

In order to realize what kinds of factors will affect the dropout rate in distance education, many researchers focus on this issue. The number of modules completed by a student can predict the dropout [8]. Furthermore, Xenos, Pierrakeas, and Pintelas indicate three kinds of factors that will affect the dropout in distance education. 1. Internal factors related to students perception and locus of control. 2. Factors related to the course and the tutors. 3. Factors related to certain demographic characteristics of the students [9]. Even many factors that will affect the dropout in distance education like age, gender, were discovered, however, many researchers still believe that many factors that affect the dropout in distance education haven't been found [10].

Dropout in distance education is a complex phenomenon influenced by multitude of variables. In the past members of the research in distance

education in the dropout rate was mainly used quantitative methods to analyze the background of the members of the inter-related factors, and then belongs to a member of the impact the dropout rate of online activity. However, not more of a journey to understand the views of members of the online activities of the dropout process, as well as the state of dropout. This study attempted to process a point of view to analyze the online activities of the members of the process of alienation, and alienation of their situation.

3 Methodology

This study from an e-tutor activity of the school to secondary school teachers understands the lines of, as well as its participation in the case of alienation. In the following sentences, the e-tutor activities, participants in the study, data analysis, as well as the research method explained.

3.1 Participant

Online instruction program lasted for two semesters. There are totally fifty-five pre-service teachers who took the course of introduction to instructional media in a university in northern Taiwan participated in this program.

3.2 E-tutor program

E-tutor program is a distance education program coporated by Chunghwa Telecom and a university in northern Taiwan. The purpose of this program is to help the students in the rural area improve their learning through the combination of distance education technology and pre-service teachers.

The students in E-tutor program were mainly from a junior high school in middle of Taiwan, and the tutors in the program were preservice teachers who took the course of introduction to instructional media in a university in northern Taiwan. In E-tutor program, the students and the tutors interacted with each other through distance education software called Xlearn.

E-tutor program lasted one semester, and the tutors have toteach stusents two hours a week. English and Mathmatics were the two subjects including in this program.

The E-tutor program consisted of four stages: 1. matching of participants, 2. pre-training workshop for the E-tutor program, 3. online tutoring, and 4. experience-sharing meeting (Fig. 1). Before the pre-service teachers started online instruction, the researchers and the staff in charge of E-tutor program at Chunghwa Telecom

determined the time when the pre-service teachers and students can participate in online instruction. The researchers and the staff matched the pre-service teachers with students in this study.

One week before the start of the online instruction, Chunghwa Telecom held a two-hour pre-training workshop for the pre-service teachers. The purpose of the workshop was to familiarize the pre-service teachers with the XLearn system, the process and the objective of E-tutor program. During the two-hour workshop, the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to use the XLearn system. Technicians were available to help solve the problems faced by the pre-service teachers. Briefly, the pre-service teachers instructed online through the XLearn system two hours a week in their dormitory; however the computer lab in school was available to the pre-service teachers who lack computer equipments.

Experience-sharing meetings were held in the midterm and final weeks of the semester for the pre-service teachers to exchange their online tutoring experience.

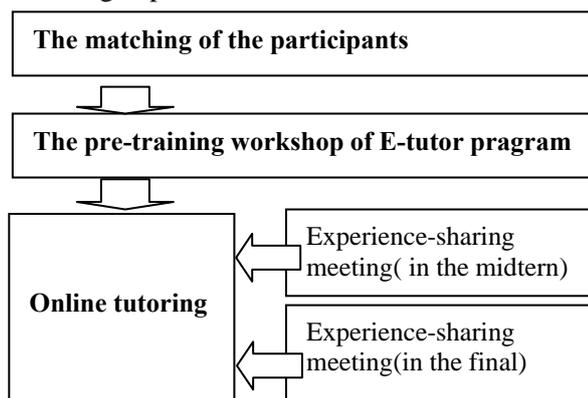


Fig. 1: Process of E-tutor program during the first semester.

3.3 Data Collection

This research collect three kinds of data: teacher reflection journals, the record of etutor sharing conference, and the audio record of individual interview.

Writing reflection journals not only can help the teachers to reconsider their own teaching and improve their instruction, but also provides much information about the teachers teaching and the problems they face. Therefore, in E-tutor program, the tutors were asked to post their reflection journals on their own blog every week.

Besides, during the online teaching period, the researcher would hold two teaching experiences-sharing meetings which were in the midway and the end of that semester. In these two

meetings, the tutors could share their personal teaching experience, what they have learned, and what their true feeling about online teaching. Moreover, in the end of semester, each tutor would be interviewed for 15 to 30 minutes to collect more information about their attitude and transformation in joining this program. Every interview would be audio recorded.

3.4 Data Analysis

In this research, the researcher analyze the participated e-tutor's daily journal, video recording of online teaching experiences-sharing meeting, and audio recording of each interview. Though analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher expected to know better about the tutor's participation in the online class.

4 Result

After analyzing the articles in preservice teachers' blogs and the records of the interview, three periods were identified.

4.1 Period of Relationship Building

In this period, tutors were energetic, and they were full of expectation and passion about their coming instruction. Besides, they were curious about their students, and tried to connect with their students actively.

T1: For me, joining E-tutor program is a very special experience, and I feel that

T5: Before I teach my student, I get connect with my student through telephone or Email, and this help me to know more about my student, and let me have a direction to design my instruction.

T12: Joining E-tutor program is a special experience for me, and I really hope that I will try my best to help my student learn English well and let him love learning English.

In this period, the main task for tutors is seemed to build good relationship with their students. Tutors often expressed their passion on instruction design, and willing to spend time knowing their students well. Tutors spent so much time on relationship building because they believe that this is important for their coming instruction.

4.2 Period of Conflict

During the whole instructional period, the tutors encountered some difficult time, and they named it as period of conflict. In this period, tutors faced many problems and these problems let the

tutors feel frustrated. Most problems that the tutors had during the period of conflict were the dysfunction of the X-learn system.

The dysfunction of Xlearn system would interrupt and delay the tutors' instruction. Because of those software and hardware problems, the tutors started to doubt the effectiveness of online instruction. Even more, they would try to refuse to use X-learn system to give their instruction to the student.

Beside of the software and hardware problems, sometimes the student's reaction toward the tutor's instruction would influence tutors educational belief immensely. Some tutors feedback that the student had bad study attitude and was often distracted by other things during the online class. When those tutors faced the problem of the student's bad study attitude, they would try to change the teaching method in the beginning, and sometimes they would try to use some interesting topics to draw student's attention to the subjects and to reduce the feeling of distance between the student and themselves. However, after trying to alter the instructional method but not getting good feedback from the student, the tutors would draw back and pay less attention in their online class.

Although the tutor kept more distance from the online class, they did not leave the instruction totally. Nevertheless, the tutors provided their instruction and solicitude in a manner of an observer who kept a safe distance and did not intervened in the student's learning. Even when the student showed their indifference toward the online class, the tutors still care about their tutee and keep offering their help and consideration in student's time of need.

The estrangement between the tutors and their tutee did not mean that the tutor drops out of the E-tutor program; yet they changed their attitude and the instructional method. Seemly, the tutor continued to teach in the online class; however, when talking with them and analyzing their teaching pattern, it was obvious that the tutors have changed a lot in both their attitude toward online teaching and instruction model.

4.3 Period of Dropout

During the period of conflict, the tutor would not quit their teaching directly. They usually tried their best to keep provide their teaching. However, if they have tried as many methods as they can to teach the student and got no good feedback from the tutee. They would gradually lose their passion and didn't

have any motivation in teaching online. Therefore, in this kind of circumstance, the tutor would decrease their teaching and finally were looked like careful less about their student.

5 Conclusion

Via the personal participation, firsthand experiences, and analyzing the interview scripts and the teaching pattern deeply, the researcher know the whole process of teaching asynchronously online and understand why some tutors kept changing their teaching method, why they quit the program in the mid way and what difficulties they have met during the classes. Those e-tutors would encounter a lot of conflicts and discouragements when teaching online.

Among these, the most significant factor is the relationship between tutor and tutee. Because the relationship is still tender, the tutors would not drop out of the program when they first had some difficulties in teaching, but drew back and kept a safe distance to provide their instruction and their care for the student. It looks like the tutor did not care about their student anymore. However, the researcher found that when the student's performance didn't match the tutor's standard or expectation, the tutors would show their solicitude in another way.

In this study, a special pattern and relationship between e-tutor and the tutee was found. People usually believe that a dropout of the E-tutor program is a leaver who would never care about their student and have no any intention to teach online. However, via this program, we found that, in this case, the tutor would use a less influential means to take care of their student. The tutor seems to estrange from their student. In fact, they still care about them. From the result, it is believed that the relationship between teacher and student is not so fragile. It is not so easy for the teacher to cut the relation off and the teacher will not give up their students without any fighting.

Acknowledgments:

The authors would like to thank the National Science Council of the Republic of China for financially supporting this research under Contract No. NSC 97-2631-S-008-003.

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