

CASE STUDY: CHUN-TAO

Chun-Tao was a student on the MSc in E-learning at the Department of Education. She was in her late 20s and comes from Singapore. For the six years after graduating with her Bachelor's degree, she worked as a teacher. She arrived in Oxford in 2006 with her husband, who was doing a doctorate there, so she was already familiar with both the city and the University at the start of her course.

The focus of the E-learning course is on the discussion of the potential of digital technologies for education at any level, but it is not a technical course and technological expertise is not demanded of the students. They have the opportunity explore different technologies together and to engage with the potential of these technologies in the light of theories of learning and of problems in contemporary education.

Chun-Tao was very curious about technology and had integrated technology into many aspects of her private, social and academic life. She kept up to date with the latest gadgets, software and games and enjoyed spending time on the Web for keeping up to date, educating herself, shopping and having fun. She cleverly blended online and offline activity and made use of university facilities and courses as well as her peers for support in her studies. In her role as a teacher, student and technology enthusiast, she was well placed to judge the potential of new technologies in schools. The interest of Chun-Tao's case study lies in her thoughtful reflection on how technology is used in schools and in her own course, as well as in the way she and a course mate provided each other academic and moral support with the dissertation writing.

Use of technology on the course

On the E-learning course many new technologies were tested by the students in order to power their reflection about the potential of digital technologies for education. One of these experiments with technology was a video-conference with a group of students from a similar course at another university in the UK. Chun-Tao found the experience very exciting. Although there were some technical difficulties, they managed to do something that would be impossible without the technology:

"One of our classmates was in Canada and we brought along... one of our classmates brought a laptop and linked it to Skype. [...] And we could see his face on the screen. And so to me that was amazing because although we are in different areas but we were able to do that and video conference as well"

On the other hand, even on a course like E-learning it proved difficult to sustain the use of new technologies. Chun-Tao had expected more widespread use of digital technologies, but found that many ideas that seemed great at the beginning of the year were soon abandoned:

"We wanted to use [technology] more as the class initially had big plans about using it, like in a blog each or having online forum, sharing assignments even after we hand it in. And then all those are just big gigantic plans which never came to be. [...] I think it could have been incorporated into the course more so that we had, you know, so we'd have a better idea or purpose of using it. Otherwise, people are just not going to use [it] [...] If no one's going to drop you messages, no one's going to be commenting on your blog [then] why do it?"

This confirmed the view which Chun-Tao expressed at the beginning the year:

"Instructors or teachers will have to make sure that the use of digital technologies are well-justified and well-integrated into the course. Otherwise, situations where instructors/teachers use digital technologies 'for the sake of using them' may well occur."

Second Life project

One of the technologies that the E-learning group explored was Second Life as a medium for online tutoring. During this project various technological, social and pedagogical issues became apparent. Chun-Tao was very well placed in her position as both student and teacher to reflect upon the potential of using Second Life for education.

Firstly, technical problems delayed the proceedings: "I think it took us about 15-20 minutes just to resolve the technical problems and to wait for people to come in". Once everybody was logged in, the group found the technology imposed certain restrictions that would disturb the social procedures currently accepted in teaching, for example with the use of voice chat:

"There are many problems with voice because it's only within a radius that you can hear people. So [if] you are out of that radius you'd not be able to hear them clearly. [...] And I think by using voice there were certain issues like who to speak first and then what comes next, so if you want to speak, if someone wants to speak but what gestures should he or she [use]"

The group found that a different code of conduct applied to virtual environments when nobody responded to a tutors question:

"I remember it very clearly [...] he raised the issue so we were supposed to discuss [...] and then came this awkward silence. And it must have lasted almost one minute before our friend in Greece stood up and said, 'Okay I'd like to say something.' Because I think when you are in that virtual environment no one is... I mean the other persons are looking at each other and you are looking at the avatars but there's no [...] pressure to, you know, to want to speak first. Unlike in the classroom where we'd be looking at each other and, okay, someone will say something fairly quickly. But I like the virtual environment though, we were just waiting for someone to speak."

The group also tried using both voice and text chat as means of communication and found that having these two channels facilitated "formal" (voice) and an "informal" (text) conversations, the latter akin to passing around notes in class, but with the difference that it was visible to the entire group.

Chun-Tao was not certain about the potential of Second Life for education:

"I think I'm still struggling to find out, because [...] the more I use Second Life, the more I feel that it's meant to be a social networking site. It's meant to be a place where people gather, whether formally or informally, but there are a lot of things... the reputation I think that Second Life has built up [...] a lot of sexual things are taking place, and then people [...] want to use it for very formal for business, I'm not sure if they want to have association with a site or a place or a world that has so many other things going on, mature stuff going on. [...] And especially for education, I think education institutions would perhaps think twice whether they want to be... they want to have events over there."

Still, she does see a potential in the virtual world medium "especially for language learning because you can use voice and you can do role play in there." "I think role playing is something that I'd like to look at because the possibilities of bringing massively multiplayer online role-playing games into Second Life."

At this stage Chun-Tao felt that they hadn't made the most of the possibilities that Second Life could potentially offer, because the tool requires a high level of technical skill in order to make use of the features that set it apart from other teaching methods:

"There was a study that says a person who wants to use Second Life has to spend at least 20 hours to become at least a novice or to even use the platform comfortably".

"I think what we actually tried to do is to bring the real world into Second Life, and I'm not sure whether that is the best way to do it. [...] we're just sitting around and

then someone will be speaking, and we're not doing it with things that we perhaps could have better made use of, some of the objects that could use or build, we did not really have that because we did not have the ability to build anything. You know, we didn't know how to write scripts or even build something. So with not having that kind of ability there was only so little that we can do".

In Chun-Tao's opinion we are not yet at the stage where Second Life presents easy opportunities for learning:

"The more I use it the more I think that unless you have a very good structure in place, unless people are going to see Second Life [...] in a different light, and unless people know how to [...] run seminars, how to do it properly in that kind of environment. It is very difficult for people at this stage because everyone is just exploring [...] And I think Second Life can perhaps provide a platform for us where we can learn how to do things in a virtual world. But perhaps in the next few years something better will come..."

"I think even if you realise that it doesn't really have much education potential, in the end I'm sure we can learn a lot from an environment like this."

Using personal technologies for work and leisure

Chun-Tao was enthusiastic about technologies and at first glance she seemed to be completely immersed in technology. Because she had to leave her heavy laptop at home, she switched to her PDA:

"I use it to view my work documents because sometimes when I'm supposed to give a presentation I'll write certain things down. And I used to be very nervous about presenting in class so I would make sure that I write them on here to look through it. And it's just some notes that complement what I am going to say in my PowerPoint. And I'll have my PowerPoint slides in there as well so I can view it. [...] And sometimes I have papers that I know that I want to read and it's easier. It's terribly small but still, you know. I can read it when I'm just looking for references"

Chun-Tao also liked to secure a good deal online and traded on eBay, buying and selling gadgets she would like to try out

"I enjoy going to Hot UK Deals. It is so interesting because there is an online forum. Each time you go you got 8,000 or 10,000 people online just sharing tips on where to get good deals. [...] I would buy things on eBay and then I would use it for a while, then if I don't like it I'll sell it. [...] I actually enjoy online shopping."

Chun-Tao admitted that she was perhaps a little addicted to the Internet, which she realised when we asked her to write an account of a single day in her life as a student. However, closer inspection of her activities yielded a much more subtle blend of online and offline activities for both work and play, and Chun-Tao seemed to be adept at switching between both. For example she used a number of libraries (in the Departments of Education and Continuing Education, and the Oxford Internet Institute, as well as the University's main Bodleian Library) and was comfortable with finding the resources she needed in Oxford. She supplemented these resources by buying books that especially interested her on the web at Amazon. As well as making good use of offline courses provided by the university – by joining the course on Academic Writing at the language centre and others – she found learning opportunities on the Web by listening to podcast lectures on technology, language learning and philosophy. Although Chun-Tao was an adept technology user, she preferred working face to face with her group mates, and she was surprised that Skype worked as a medium for academic communication:

"We were busier then and couldn't find time to meet up, so we 'met' up via Skype and email. I didn't think this way of communicating was better than face-to-face interaction, but I was surprised that it worked well for the both of us."

Chun-Tao also blended the academic side of her life with social technology by using Facebook to find out about software and sites that would be useful for her work, like Zotero and ClickUni, which "looks something like iGoogle but it has things like Facebook [...] and] College News."

For fun Chun-Tao liked playing games both on and offline, as well as making use of the features that Web 2.0 technologies provide for connecting with friends:

"I also love the board-game equivalent version of Settlers of Catan. [...] I think the board-game version is more exciting with all the verbal shouting from the players. I like playing online scrabble and Boggle on Facebook. Usually we would have to compete with strangers; however, by playing on Facebook, we can compete with our friends."

Thus although most aspects of Chun-Tao's life seemed to be permeated by technology, this does not mean that she had abandoned the off-line world, and she integrated digital technologies when it suited her.

Research buddies

Chun-Tao had quite a few commitments competing for her attention. As well as doing the MSc course, she was an intern on a project elsewhere in the university, and although she was good at motivating herself, she was concerned about managing her time and balancing all her work. She told us in the spring:

"I am slightly worried in terms of time management as I will be starting on an internship in the summer. However, I will make sure that I manage my time well [...] be very focused and prioritise the work that has to be done."

One of her strategies for keeping on track was to team up with another student on the course in order to support and motivate each other through the process of researching and writing their dissertations. The idea came about in class:

"We were talking about how we should actually regulate ourselves or try to keep your timetable in order. And in class we had this discussion and [student name] brought up the idea of research buddy, which we all thought it was a good idea." "I am working very closely with my research buddy now and I think she provides me with a lot of encouragement and increases my motivation in working on the project."

"We try to talk to each other about our project outlines. And while we don't go very deeply into issues, because I guess we know our subject, our area, better ourselves, but I think there are some things that like filling in our [ethics] form, what to put on the information sheet, those are things that we can share. And we find it very good to get together and talk about that. And for questionnaire questions I will let her take a look and she will try to change certain things after discussion. And she asks me questions like, do you think that is necessary and that makes me think about, yeah maybe I should change the question a bit."