

Article

The Challenges of Blended Learning: Critically Evaluating the Chinese Language Case

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Abstract

This article reviews the Mid-Career Development Chinese Language course (MCDCL) funded by the British Inter-university China Centre, a project funded from various public sources in the UK. The discussion focuses on how and why the MCDCL course has adopted the blended learning construct and with what outcomes. Using two frameworks for blended learning – the Community of Inquiry and the Sloan-C Pillars – it offers a thorough examination of the MCDCL course, and discusses the results of a survey which was devised to collect feedback from participants on the course. The article concludes that the MCDCL course throws up particular challenges for the blended learning concept as a whole. A detailed evaluation highlights areas for attention ranging from how the course is organised and workloads are balanced, to the approach of teachers in their level of involvement in distance learning, and the overall management of the course with regard to the use of technology, cost-effectiveness and a host of other considerations.

Keywords: Blended learning; course evaluation; Chinese language course; British Inter-university China Centre; Mid-Career Development Chinese Language Course.

1. Introduction

The Mid-Career Development Chinese Language Course (MCDCL) is a language project sponsored by the British Inter-university China Centre (BICC). The BICC is a joint venture between the Chinese departments at the University of Bristol, the University of Manchester and the University of Oxford and was funded for 5 years (2006-2011) by the Arts and the Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). This was significant funding, and unique in encouraging national collaboration, especially involving language-based Area Studies, among High Education institutions.

The MCDCL project was established by the BICC to provide language courses to professionals who work in academic or academic-related fields in the UK and who may need to use the Chinese language in their research (i.e. field work). In 2008, after considering the demographics of its potential participants, the MCDCL project adopted the blended learning construct, defined by Sharman and Barrett (2007) as combining a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with the use of technology such as software applications, online content and a broader virtual learning environment.

During the past decade, blended learning has seen growing popularity in the Higher Education sector. For instance, in 2003, the Educause Centre for Applied Research (ECAR) survey by Arabasz and Baker showed that among its 277 participating Higher Education institutions in the United States, more than seventy percent expected to

increase the number of e-learning courses, while one-third anticipated greater than ten percent growth in blended learning courses in the following year.

In the UK, in response to the fast growing trend of blended learning, the HEFCE approved a five-year project (2005-2010) to establish a Blended Learning Unit (BLU) as a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University of Hertfordshire. The aim was to 'support, promote and share new approaches to Blended Learning practice across the University and more widely in the sector' (1).

It is hardly surprising that recognition for the value of blended learning is on the rise, given the wide documentation of its advantages in the literature on distance learning. Graham, Allen, and Ure (2005), for example, have summarised three primary benefits of blended learning as being 'improved pedagogy, increased access and flexibility, and increased cost-effectiveness'. Hong and Samimy (2010) categorised empirical studies showing a positive link between blended learning and language learning. This brought together multiple aims, such as facilitating linguistic achievement, further motivating learners, expanding knowledge of the 'target' culture and empowering learner autonomy.

It seemed that the complementary characteristics of distance learning and F2F classes have made blended learning an ideal format for today's language learners. On the one hand, computer technology and the internet offer more than just convenience to learners in terms of their flexibility in time and place. According to research, they can also lead to improved cognition as they allow learners to develop their abilities in critical thinking by working independently as well as collaboratively (Newman, Webb and Cochrane 1997; Benbunan-Fich and Hiltz 1999; Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000). Research has also shown that distance learning helps to create a relatively more socio-emotional relaxing community compared to the F2F classroom (Garrison and Vaughan 2008). On the other hand the importance of F2F classes should not be overlooked. Kvavik and Causo (2005) found that although students enjoy the convenience that technology has brought to them, they do not necessarily prefer technology as a replacement for teachers. In fact, they value the interactions with their teachers and they are worried about reduced verbal communication. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) recognised F2F communication as a rich medium for its provision of multiple paralinguistic cues such as facial expression and tone of voice, not to mention the value of human interaction to the learning process and knowledge acquisition (Hanson and Clem 2007).

Taking advantage of these strengths, the MCDCL course has further implemented a unique model of blended learning, comprising a total of three intensive weeks of F2F classes (held at the Institute for Chinese Studies, University of Oxford during the university holidays (September, January, April), and distance learning, which amounts to 28 weeks over the three university terms, using two online locations (2). In other words, the F2F classes and distance learning alternate between holidays and academic terms to suit the professional work patterns of the participants of the MCDCL course.

This is a unique way of delivering courses of this sort in the UK, with an innovative timeframe, and the model it encourages has yet to be reviewed in any systematic way, with a view to drawing some significant conclusions. This article will therefore examine the MCDCL course firstly using two chosen frameworks of blended learning to account for various aspects of the course, such as its curriculum, assessment and technical support. This is followed by a look at feedback from students, which provides an in-depth evaluation of the course and addresses potential areas for improvement. With all of this in view I argue that despite its strengths and obvious success, the blended learning format poses a number of educational challenges. A more specific aim of my review is to share some experiences in convening a blended learning course, with the intention that this may be instructive for current and potential providers of blended learning courses elsewhere in the sector.

2. Using existing frameworks to explain the MCDCL course

There is a difficulty at the outset in appropriately describing the MCDCL course which is that there are few available evaluative frameworks for approaching blended learning courses in a qualitative and comprehensive way. One such option, however, is provided by the Community of Inquiry and the Sloan-C Pillars. As I show here, for the purpose of this paper these offer different but complementary approaches to examining the MCDCL course – with attention to the Community of Inquiry focusing on the delivery of a blended learning course, and the Sloan-C pillars approaching from the perspective of course management.

2.1. Community of inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI, see Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000, Garrison and Vaughan 2008) posits the existence of a 'community' in learning environments in which knowledge construction takes place. It is focused on three elements that are considered to be crucial for successful blended learning: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is seen as a vital element in this community with its goal of knowledge construction. It promotes critical thinking amongst learners, as well as increasing their levels of cognitive involvement through sustained but calmly paced communication (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2001). Social presence refers to the personal emotions and the interpersonal affect amongst participants of the community (Garrison and Anderson 2003). Ideally, the social presence minimises the affective variables such as anxiety and peer pressure, and hence facilitates cognitive presence. The third element –teaching presence, through instructional design and organisation, and facilitating discourse and direct instruction (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer 2001)– has an important binding role to play for the learning community, in helping to achieve both cognitive and social presence. The following part of the discussion addresses the extent to which the MCDCL course serves to enable a Community of Inquiry.

As far as cognitive presence is concerned, the MCDCL, despite regular communication, relies on learners' autonomy to a large extent (Benson 2001). During the 28-week distance learning over the three academic terms, students are presented with three types of learning material – text (with audio file), text-related vocabulary (Chinese characters illustrated) and text-related grammar. The text-related grammar is briefly explained in the text and also linked to more detailed information in a grammar archive which the Institute for Chinese Studies (ICS), University of Oxford started to publish and update on its website in 1999. The grammar archive on the ICS website lists 60 entries covering most major grammar patterns in Chinese. Each entry elaborates on how and when to (or not to) apply a particular grammar pattern along with examples in Chinese character, Pinyin, English and the sound file. Apart from learning the designated material every week, students also need to complete one listening assignment and one written assignment which involve the vocabulary and the grammar of the designated material of the week. This mode of distance learning is designed to present students with a wider range of cognitive processes, as described by Garrison et al (2001), through a triggering event (such as reading and listening to text); exploration (solving puzzles to access the meaning of the text and decoding the logic of the related grammar based on given information); integration (mapping new information with existing knowledge for comprehension and acquisition); and resolution (encoding learnt vocabulary and grammar into written output).

Regarding teaching presence, although students' individual effort is important in maximising cognitive presence, it does not mean that they are isolated or solely self-supported. The MCDCL course allows students to contact their teachers by email or through submitted work whenever needed during distance learning to propose questions related to the learning material or in response to instructor feedback. This mode of communication has frequently occurred in students' assignments submitted online where comments, such as 'I am not sure if I have used the structure correctly. Is this a case that requires the structure?' or 'I do not quite understand this part. I know the words but why is this particle here?', were highlighted by the students to the teachers. Therefore teaching presence of the CoI is normally realised via written responses to the

completed assignments and the raised enquiries over the period of distance learning in the MCDCL. However, during the three intensive weeks of F2F classes in the university holidays, teaching presence is more active and direct focusing on tasks that students would have difficulties in accomplishing on their own so as to 'counterbalance methodological restrictions' (Neumeier 2005). These tasks particularly include oral activities in the form of communication, discussion and debating and focus on perplexing grammar in Chinese of which comprehension is better achieved through oral negotiation with the teachers (see Hu 2010). During the intensive weeks, training was also provided so as to improve students' autonomous learning (Broady and Kenning 1996) and to raise their metacognitive awareness (Garrison and Arbaugh 2007), in which teachers shared their expertise on aspects of learning strategies and learning management.

Garrison et al (2000) suggested three indicators of a favourable social presence in the CoI: emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion. Garrison and Anderson (2003) further suggested that a cohesive community can be created based upon friendship or common purposes. The students of the MCDCL project are mature professionals whose subjects of research and work range from anthropology and Chinese medicine to business and international relations. Thus as a social group, the MCDCL class shares a common background and has solidarity owing to the social stability and the common interests of its members. In the F2F classes, students express their opinions about their previous and current learning experience (either required as an oral practice or voluntarily) and comment on the performance and contribution of others.

However, social presence among students is substantially lacking in the distance learning element of the MCDCL syllabus. A large number of studies have reiterated the importance of collaborative learning in an online environment, with its uses in improving learning outcomes and student satisfaction (i.e., So and Brush 2008, William, Duray and Reddy 2006). However, in their 2004 study, McPherson and Nunes explored the reasons behind the underuse of their Virtual Social Space, arguing that students, especially part-time students in full-time employment, may simply not have the time or interest to engage in an online social community. Due to problems with the function of its initial interface, the staff convening the MCDCL project did not contemplate the setting up of a virtual social environment. When the project moved to WebLearn, its teachers began using Forum on WebLearn to set topics of current affairs for students' discussion. Here participation by the students was evident but they were not fully active, suggesting similar outcomes to those noted by McPherson and Nunes. This confirms the observation made by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) that teaching presence is significant in determining a successful learning community, and suggests that the failure of the VSS noted in McPherson and Nunes' and of the Forum in the MCDCL course may have resulted from them not having effective teaching presence.

The Community of Inquiry provides a framework of key elements that ought to be taken into account for a blended learning course. However, it does not define the criteria for how to measure these elements. Precisely speaking, the classification and sub-classification of, for instance, teaching presence is more of a checklist of considerations. Studies using the method of content analysis summarise the ratio of occurrences of teaching presence (i.e., Anderson et al 2001) or the patterns of responses elicited (i.e., Shea et al 2010), but can barely provide guidelines on measuring the quality of the three elements in the CoI.

2.2. The Sloan-C Pillars

The Sloan Consortium (3) has established a framework of the Sloan-C Five Pillars to examine the quality of online education, learning effectiveness, student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction, cost effectiveness and access.

2.2.1. Learning Effectiveness

Most importantly, a course, being traditional or blended learning, needs to result in learning effectiveness. Laumakis, Graham and Dziuban (2009) suggested that a direct measure of learning effectiveness is the scores on an exam or a performance assessment; whereas indirect measures include course evaluations, time spent in active learning or student engagement. As far as the direct measure is concerned, the MCDCL course is highly effective in producing positive learning outcomes. For instance, in the second year of the MCDCL course, all seven students who attempted the assessment were awarded a Certificate of Achievement for successfully fulfilling the requirements of the course which contained the following four aspects:

1. Attendance – students needed to attend no less than two thirds of the F2F classes.
2. Course Work – students needed to complete eighty percent of the online assignments to a satisfactory standard.
3. Exams – a written and an oral exam were set in the third intensive week of the F2F classes.
4. Written Essay – a topic-based essay in Chinese needs to be submitted by the end of the course.

As for indirect measures of learning effectiveness, we have received favourable feedback from the students who have followed the course throughout the year. However, the drop rate of students was as high as half of the initial registration; reasons given were mostly personal affairs or work engagement. Distance learning in general requires disciplinary and organisational skills from the students. We anticipated that the students of the MCDCL would excel in this aspect as they were mature, working professionals. However, the amount of family and work business that these students are committed to seemed to make it very difficult for some of them to manage regular extra time for self-study.

2.2.2. Student satisfaction

Some students have reported how they benefit from the MCDCL course either in conversation with the teachers or by email, with two notable benefits being 'better understanding of the grammar' and 'improved confidence in speaking'. The MCDCL course attempted to address issues of grammar more directly (how and why it is different from the grammar of Latin and Germanic languages) and systematically (sorted by difficulty level). In the F2F classes, the MCDCL focused intensely on organising spoken activities or oral presentations, as these can hardly be achieved by students on their own in the online learning environment.

However, because casual feedback is far from being sufficient in measuring the level of satisfaction of the students, a survey was designed to gather responses from the students about the MCDCL course, the results of which will be discussed later.

It is worth mentioning the professional development that some students have achieved by attending the MCDCL course. Given that the participants of the MCDCL course were mostly working in China-related fields, they naturally formed a social circle for career advice and opportunities. For example, one student who was a doctor in Chinese medicine received an invitation for publication from a student of anthropology through their acquaintance in the MCDCL course. Furthermore, some students also used the language skills or knowledge that they obtained from taking the course to expand their professional profiles. For instance, one student has since set up several projects with relevant organisations in China and has also secured government funding for Chinese language teachers' training at her university department.

2.2.3. Faculty satisfaction

The outlined elements of faculty satisfaction have been defined differently in some of the Sloan-C publications. Lorenzo and Moore (2002) included moral and administrative support by the faculty, however Moore (2005) categorised matters involving faculty support into the cost effectiveness pillar, which hence was amended to be the pillar of cost effectiveness and institutional commitment. Despite the notional issue, this pillar attempts to address a bilateral relationship between the faculty and the blended learning courses –how the faculty can best support the courses and how the courses can benefit the faculty.

Both the BICC and the ICS have been sharing the responsibilities of faculty support for the MCDCL project. The MCDCL was created and managed by the BICC which offers teaching and administrative support, whereas the ICS has served as the host institution, providing facilities, technical support and learning resources which the ICS already owned. Being an externally-funded project, the MCDCL posed little financial burden to the hosting faculty. However, the experience of running the MCDCL suggests that it was essential for the faculty to have well developed technical facilities and e-learning resources, and to be able to deliver e-learning materials according to the specific requirements of a blended learning course.

2.2.4. Cost effectiveness

Many studies have argued for the cost effectiveness of blended learning courses (i.e., Osguthorpe and Graham 2003, Graham, Allen, and Ure 2005), and many institutions have adopted blended learning courses in lieu of traditional classrooms for this reason. However, cost effectiveness is not necessarily a given with blended learning courses. In the case of the MCDCL course, budgets on administration and technology are minimal as they are largely covered by the existing personnel and technical facilities at the BICC and ICS. However, the academic personnel cost of the MCDCL course alone requires primarily five elements:

1. Teaching F2F classes.
2. Designing materials for distance learning.
3. Transferring learning materials to an online interface.
4. Correcting students' assignments.
5. Communicating with students distantly.

One may argue that (2) and (3) would only be applicable for the initial year of the course, because once the materials are ready and uploaded online, they can be recycled in further years. However, this does not take into account the fact that these materials need regular updating and there are still technical problems with the current interface for online education (i.e. WebLearn) for automatic recycling of previous learning material.

Even elements (1), (4) and (5) alone could each pose challenges to the cost effectiveness of the course. For instance, a total of 60 hours of F2F classes intensively taught during the three university vacations equals to 2.5 hours per week for the 24 academic weeks. Further, for the 28 weekly online assignments during the terms, the correction time by the teacher could vary depending on the number of students. If we assume that it will take an average of 15 minutes to correct one student's assignment, this would accumulate to 3 hours per week in total for a group of 12 students. In addition, the MCDCL project also offers unlimited support for the students to contact the teachers whenever needed for course enquiries or technical problems. Though highly efficient in fulfilling students' needs, this makes it difficult to count the relevant working hours of the teachers. If we assume the contact time to be approximately 0.5 hours per week for the teachers, the above work load concerning elements (1), (4) and (5) would add up to a minimum of 6 hours per week (F2F classes-2.5+Correcting assignments-3+Contact-0.5) for a group of 12 students during the academic terms, despite that the F2F teaching actually take place during the university holidays.

2.2.5. Access

The pillar access is a broad category concerning 'reducing all barriers' (Lorenzo and Moore 2002) between students and the blended learning courses. One particular aspect that this pillar addresses is the issue of the media used –computers and the internet– and their associated problems.

Blended learning courses unavoidably encounter the technical issues of distance learning, and the MCDCL has experienced some difficulties in this. For instance there were occasions when students could not complete the assignments in time due to having no or a broken internet connection, students' computers could not play the sound files because they required certain software and there were difficulties in uploading or submitting assignments and work lost due to website malfunction. These types of problems could easily frustrate students and disrupt their learning process, especially for working professionals like those in the MCDCL project who have many other commitments and have to carefully manage their time for study.

Technical support is very important, but an immediate solution can rarely be achieved. Therefore taking measures to prepare the students for such scenarios has proved to be most effective. For example, students were advised that technical problems are likely to occur and assured them of sufficient support and moral understanding from the teachers. Students were also suggested that if technical problems occurred, not to waste time trying repeatedly to solve the problems, but use their planned hours to do alternative tasks. Print-outs of some of the online materials were also made available to the students.

Precautionary measures also included training on how to use the interface to access learning materials and assignments, how to download and use the sound files and other common matters that students may experience during their distance learning. In terms of Chinese language learning in particular, training on how to type in Chinese characters, how to change computer settings to read Chinese texts and how to use online dictionaries was also provided to the students at the beginning of the MCDCL course.

3. Using student feedback to assess the MCDCL course

In the attempt to explain the MCDCL course using existing blended learning frameworks, the previous section has raised a number of questions that await to be answered through students' feedback. Such questions include 'is the cognitive load required by the course appropriate?', 'how is teaching presence?', 'what do students think of the social aspect of the course?', 'how satisfied are students with the MCDCL course?', 'is the issue of access addressed properly and the problem solved promptly?'

In addition to searching for the answers to the aforementioned questions, I am also interested in discovering students' opinion towards the blended learning construct of the MCDCL course. A survey with a similar purpose was used in Garrison and Vaughan (2008) to assess the blended learning courses offered at the University of Calgary, Canada. I adapted some items from the Calgary survey to meet the needs of the current review and also created new items for its particular interest.

The MCDCL course has been running since the start of the 2008 academic year. In the first year of the course there was only one level for beginners and in the second year a higher level of intermediate was added. The review survey was sent to nine students who have successfully completed the course in both years. Two students achieved both the beginning and the intermediate level. Students worked at universities across the UK, i.e., London School of Economics, Oxford Brookes University, University of Bath, University of Cambridge, University College London, University of Essex, University of Warwick and University of Westminster. For reliability reasons, the survey was administered anonymously. Seven of the students filled in the survey, the results of which are presented below.

4. Results

The MCDCL Course Review Survey (see Appendix) consists of five aspects: learning outcome, provision and support, teaching, social and interaction and the course in general.

4.1. Learning outcome

All participants felt strongly that they have made good progress and that the course has met their expectations, indicating a very positive learning outcome from the students' point of view. The students believe that they achieved the most in knowledge of vocabulary and characters, in understanding grammar, and in having improved their ability in reading. This is indicated by comments such as the following:

I made progress in knowledge and understanding of Chinese grammar, and also increased my knowledge of Chinese characters. By the end of the course I was able to read simplified newspaper articles, which was my original goal in taking the course.

I feel I made progress with vocabulary, recognising sentence structure and characters and the ability to analyse texts. The course met my expectations and was very suitable for me, both in terms of level as well as the on-line teaching method.

In contrast, students' responses to the improvement of learning skills were somewhat mixed. This seems to indicate different interpretations students had towards the term 'learning skills'. Some students (n=3) believed that the course equipped them with new 'linguistic skills' such as analysing sentences with complex structures, being more confident in initiating conversations or improved listening skills. However, two students who did interpret learning skills as 'how one learns the language' held different opinions; one of whom believed that he/she started to take a 'more well rounded approach to learning' especially adding e-learning techniques after taking the course, whereas the other thought that he/she had brought with himself/herself the skills needed to the MCDCL course. In other words, this student did not feel that the course equipped him/her with new learning skills, nor that there was any such need for this to be addressed.

4.2. Provision and support

This section asks participants to rate the sufficiency of learning resources, the quality of learning materials, the amount of work load and the support that the MCDCL provided. Overall, the responses to this section were positive. A large majority of the students agreed that the MCDCL course provides not only sufficient (n=6) but also good quality learning resources (n=7). There were also reassuring comments on the administrative, learning and technical support of the MCDCL course, as almost all participants indicated 'Very good' and 'Good'. However, as far as the work load was concerned, the students' opinions were split, with four students considering it 'Moderate', two students 'Heavy' and one 'Too Heavy'.

4.3. Teaching

Students were satisfied with the teaching and their teachers during the intensive weeks at Oxford saying that it was 'well prepared and structured', 'interactive and engaging' and 'knowledgeable and fun'. One student, though, did think that the oral practice during the intensive weeks was not sufficient. Given that oral practice was one of the major tasks during the intensive weeks, this particular comment suggests that there is still some room for improvement on this matter.

As for the teachers' role during distance learning, positive comments include:

The teacher played a key role – both in making the material very accessible and also in making sure we were able to understand the content.

The teacher responded well to queries and gave constructive feedback on assignments.

However, one student appealed for more teacher-initiated contact, saying that

I received helpful written comments on my work during the course and it was good to know my teacher could be contacted by email if I had questions. However I did not take advantage of this. It would be nice if the teacher could proactively email students during the distance learning, to check how things are going and offer help with problems. It generally felt quite impersonal.

4.4. Social and interaction

Some participants (n=4) were content with the social aspect of the course. In particular, they believed that students from different backgrounds formed an interesting group and they could learn from each other. However, some appeared to be somewhat disappointed for the reasons given below:

I did not have much opportunity to socialise with other students as we tended to eat lunch independently and I was unable to attend the group dinners because I had to return to London immediately at the end of the course for family commitments. I did not communicate with other students during the distance learning.

I did not socialise as much with classmates as I had expected, however this maybe because many classmates had to travel to class and then leave directly after the class or leave early. I enjoyed the end of course dinner and the opportunity to meet other students from different course levels.

Nevertheless, feedback on the interaction with the teachers was unequivocally positive. Participants agreed that the interaction with the teachers was very good and the teachers were 'friendly, helpful, accessible, and encouraging'.

4.5. The MCDCL course

This summary section attempts to explore students' opinions on the blended learning construct –whether its two distinct components are effectively combined and how it might differ from traditional teaching. This section also anticipates suggestions from the participants about the MCDCL course and for its potential candidates.

In general all students were satisfied with the MCDCL course. Most students considered the two components of blended learning - F2F and distance learning - being 'complementary, relevant, mutually enhancing and well structured.' However, one report indicated that some knowledge taught during classroom teaching was not practised enough during distance learning.

Students gave very interesting feedback which, on the one hand, acknowledged the value of blended learning for 'wasting less time' and allowing 'learning at one's own pace', but on the other hand, pointed that blended learning posed a challenge to students working full-time. In their own words it 'places more reliance on the student to keep on track and to clear up difficulties as they occur' as well as 'places emphasis on getting ahead.' Students also felt that the F2F classes cannot be replicated by distance learning because as they wrote:

F2F classes were very useful for intensive and more structured learning as well as personal interaction which is important for language learning.

There was less opportunity to practice speaking the language during distance learning.

In students' opinion, the most effective aspects of the MCDCL were the F2F intensive weeks; the teaching staff; and the online materials including both texts and the assignments. However, the students' responses to what they felt were the least effective aspects of the MCDCL were scattered, with points made about the high level of self-management skill required, being unable to stay overnight during the intensive weeks, insufficient oral practice, 'online listening assignment' (no further explanation given). One student also concerned about the technical problems being that

The links to the on-line weekly lessons were not always working (however to some extent the resources folder resolved this problem), so it was not always easy to follow which lessons were for which class/week. The web interface could be made more effective/user friendly and it should be easier to print off the materials for each lesson e.g. with the same formatting or in one single document.

The participants of the survey would also encourage other potential learners to follow the MCDCL course. Nevertheless, their advice comes with a warning that the course demands hard work, and the need for 'setting aside time for the distance learning', while 'being aware of the need for self-discipline', 'being prepared for a demanding amount of work'. It also recommended 'working with a language partner during the course of learning the language.'

Through the last question of the survey, participants have helped to make suggestions for the MCDCL course, which are:

- *To include scheduled Skype sessions with the teacher and other students to practice speaking skills during the distance learning period.*
- *The web interface/access to weekly lessons online could be improved to make it more user-friendly.*
- *It would be good to separate beginners with no experience and those with many years' experience who still consider themselves beginners.*
- *To pair students with native Chinese students in their local universities to improve language abilities of both.*

5. Discussion

This paper has examined and evaluated the Mid-Career Development Chinese Language course, focusing on its construct of blended learning, in which face-to-face (F2F) classes are combined with distance learning in an alternating model.

On a positive note, students were largely satisfied with the MCDCL course. They believed that they have achieved a great deal and that the learning has been effective. They also felt inspired by the teaching during the intensive weeks and the distance learning period. The students were content with the quality of the learning resources that the course offered, as well as the administrative, learning and technical support that they received during the course. In addition to improved linguistic abilities, students' career development has benefited from the MCDCL course in terms of professional contacts and project opportunities.

However, the feedback from the students also indicated that there were areas for improvement. In reference to the Community of the Inquiry, some students' feedback showed that the cognitive presence was to some degree supernumerary, the teacher presence was limited during the distance learning period and the social presence was not entirely satisfactory. For example, half of the responses rated the work load of the course being 'heavy' and several comments were made about the large amount of dedication in time and effort required by the course. Other comments were pertinent to the social aspect. Some students enjoyed contact with their group for its friendly and sharing atmosphere. However, others disliked the fact that opportunity for socialising,

which could have been provided by the course, was compromised by convenience constraint and weak group dynamics. Finally, the presence of language teacher in the context of distance learning was viewed negatively as a rather passive presence, with contributions from tutors taking the form of written feedback alone. Thus, through the survey, the suggestion was put forward that the distance learning element of the course would benefit from greater teacher-initiated contact, such as through proactive communication and web conferences. This suggestion in particular contributes to the previous discussion about teaching presence as a directive and motivational force for the maintaining social presence in an online community.

The students' feedback also highlighted the author's argument that the institute hosting blended learning courses needs to be well prepared in both e-learning resources and technology. Despite positive comments on learning and technical supports, some do appeal for richer resources and a more user-friendly interface for the MCDCL course. This addresses the Sloan-C pillars of Faculty support and Access. This discussion has also taken a view on the cost-effectiveness pillar and its importance when planning self-financed blended learning courses.

All in all, through 2008 to 2010, the MCDCL course has served its purpose to equip British academics with the requisite learning in the Chinese language, presented as a complementary aspect of their professional development. However, the MCDCL, being a blended learning course, also reflects a number of challenges. These challenges echo theories and arguments in relation to blended learning and also demand attention from organisers and teachers of blended learning courses.

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Notes

[1] See <http://www.herts.ac.uk/about-us/learning-and-teaching/learning-teaching-institute/blu-cetl/home.cfm>

[2] See <http://www.ctcfl.ox.ac.uk> and <https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk>

[3] According to its website, the Sloan Consortium, sponsored by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, is a consortium of individuals, institutions and organisations dedicated to improving the scale, quality and breadth of online education.

Appendix – The Review Survey of the Mid-Career Development Chinese Language Course

Learning outcome

1. Do you feel that you have made progress in Chinese language by taking the MCDCL course? If so, how much progress do you think you have made? Did it meet your original expectations? Also, please specify in which aspects you have made progress.
2. Do you feel that you have made improvements in terms of your learning skills? If so, please specify in which aspects.

Provision and support

1. Do you agree that the MCDCL course provides sufficient learning resources?

Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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2. The quality of the learning materials in the MCDCL course is

Very good	Good	Not sure	Not good	Bad
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3. The working load of the MCDCL course is

Too light	Light	Moderate	Heavy	Too heavy
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4. How would you comment on the administrative, learning and technical support of the MCDCL course?

	Very good	Good	Not sure	Not sure	Not good	Bad
Administrative						
Learning						
Technical						

Teaching

1. How would you comment on the teaching during the intensive weeks at Oxford?
2. How would you comment on the teachers' role during the periods of distance learning?

Social and interaction

1. How do you feel about the social aspect with other students during the intensive weeks at Oxford and during distance learning?
2. How do you feel about the interaction with the teachers during the intensive weeks at Oxford and during distance learning?

The MCDCL course

1. Overall, are you satisfied with the MCDCL course?
2. How would describe the relationship between the classroom learning and the distance learning in this course (i.e., did they enhance each other? Were they relevant to each other? Was there a clear connection between them or little or not at all)?
3. How does this course (combining face-to-face classes with distance learning) differ from traditional classroom instruction?
4. What was the most effective aspect of this course?

5. What was the least effective aspect of this course?
6. What advice would you give to a student considering the MCDCL course for the first time?
7. What suggestions can you provide to help strengthen the MCDCL course?

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