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**Putting the Learners into E-learning:
An Experience of Sukhothai Thammathirat Open
University(STOU), Thailand**

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Abstract

E learning , an innovative approach to distance learning creates new learning environment and opportunities. It has been implemented in every field and challenged educators especially distance educators in the field of library and information science worldwide. E learning situation in Thai universities has been remarkable . STOU distance education system with focus on its e learning system was described for its learner-centered approach . An experience of the graduate course "Research in Information Science was shown as an example for taking learners' characteristics and needs in designing and developing the e learning course.

Introduction

As one of the important component of higher learning , e learning , a type of open or flexible learning, the new method of teaching and learning, and an imperative strategy in the educational reform creates new borderless learning environment and opportunities and bring dramatic changes in the global educational landscape. E learning facilitates the access of greater numbers of people and improve student learning outcomes and has the potential to contribute to their lifelong development and their well-being which is the ultimate purpose of education. E learning has been implemented in every field and all forms of education,

challenged educators especially distance educators worldwide especially the field of library and information science.

From distance learning to elearning

Distance learning has gained popularity all over the world as a means of extending continuing education to all people and it has benefited from the rapid advances in electronic telecommunications in the 1980s and early 1990s. New communication technologies enable learning to take place beyond the classroom. Many colleges, universities and institutions offer courses via the distance education system. Through the influence of Internet and the Web, distance learning gains its popularity and high status in the foreseeable future.

The Internet and World Wide Web broaden the scope of conventional distance education to online learning or web based learning. New types of educational technologies are emerging at an ever-accelerating pace. The integration of new types of educational technologies allows flexible learning, increased potential for interaction and access to a wide clientele. The Web is not only the medium of course delivery, but much more important than that, the Web is the course content and the information sources for students in the field, both traditional and distance universities. This adds value of elearning to the field of library and information science in higher education.

E learning situation in Thai universities

E learning has been used widely in Thai universities both the traditional and open universities. Sakorn Boondao, Sumruay Komlayut and Waranya Poonawat (2004) studied the elearning situation of the universities in Thailand. It was found that 35.1 % of the universities had been conducting elearning courses for an average of 2.7 years. Of the universities, 15.8% were in the process of setting up elearning, while 29.1 % had not yet started but planned to use it within 2.4 years on average. The important factors for the success of elearning courses were clear regulations of the university, strong and continuous support from the administrators, and sufficient and efficient infrastructure. The elearning was used mainly as a supplement to traditional

teaching and learning. The interaction between lecturers and students was both online and offline. All of the universities using elearning were committed to providing support for the necessary infrastructure. It was also found that the traditional and open universities had similarities and differences regarding of elearning courses. Both used elearning almost exclusively as a supplement to existing courses, and used synchronous and asynchronous interaction and offline techniques for the interaction between lecturers and students. In regard to students' satisfaction, most students were satisfied with the elearning courses. They suggested that elearning courses should supplement the main teaching process. The students felt that elearning courses did not contain enough details so that students could not fully understand. Submitting questions to the lectures through elearning was complicated and to access the lesson was inconvenient.

However, as this research was conducted since 2004, during the past four years, there has been a rapid growth in the number of elearning courses in Thai universities. The IT 2010 National Information Technology Policies strengthen information infrastructure and promote innovation. Moreover, the "Regulations for Degree Programs Offered via Distance Learning" issued by the Ministry of Education in 2005 calls for an increasing interest in elearning and more strong commitment and support from the administrators at the policy level both traditional and distance universities as elearning was seen as important technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning and enhance the image and academic profile of the institutions.

In the field of library and information science, results of doctoral thesis conducted by Manmart (2002: abstract) showed that the library and information science schools in Thailand are keeping up with the changes in information and communication technology. Internet use has impacted on academic staff knowledge and skills, their teaching methods and activities and their communication patterns and research behavior.

Learner-centered concept

Elearning is an innovative approach to distance learning. It presents immense opportunities for the promotion of an effective educational environment in the digital age and calls for learner-centered focus with new roles and competencies of faculty, students and librarians. Learning in the twenty first century is significantly different from learning in the previous century. There has been a shift away from a teacher-centered approach to a student-centered or learner-centered one -- with more concern for the learners, not as solitary learners, but within a social context and culture.

“Learner-centered” is the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners—their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities and needs—with a focus on learning—the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners..(McCombs and Whisler, 1997: p.9)

The learner-centered framework adds a constraint reminder that the human element cannot be left out of even the most advanced technology supported networked learning communities...One of the biggest challenge is to design educational systems where technology is in service to learners. The paradigm must value and support diverse learners and learning contexts anytime, anywhere.. (McCombs and Varkili 2005: 1597) Through “Learner-centered,” emphasis has turned from the teacher as an importer of knowledge to a mentor, coach, and facilitator of learning. Resource-based learning and problem-based learning promote information-literate learners who can search for information, synthesize, summarize, and evaluate the information they find, and who can act independently and think critically and creatively.

Learning is considered to be a lifelong process and the means to cope with continuous or radical changes. Hsi and Gale(2003, p.6) emphasized that when elearning occurs, a balance of the *E* and the *Learn* was needed. Too often, there was only emphasis on the E, and they showed attributes of elearning that includes the Learn side as follows:

The E—anytime, anywhere; content is delivered via a network; enables accountability of learning; connects participant with each other; archive of each

learner's work and interactions is kept; and one –to-many.

The Learning-- on-going monitoring of progress; learning by doing with Feedback; repertoire of knowledge representations; repertoire of online activity Structures; prompts, hints, guidance; human intervention; and incentives/ motivation aligned with individual and organization.

E learning virtualized the characteristics of the learning environment, paving the way for the new environment, new learning strategies and the emerging new learners and new teachers. Learning opportunities, access to education especially higher education is provided with no boundaries of space and time. Learning becomes more self-directed, collaborative, intertwined with personal life and work, and more resource-based, calling for perpetual access and usage of information and learning resources. Learning shifts from *know what* to *knowing how*, how to learn, how to secure information, use it, and how to relate to a changing society. The new emphasis will be on access and usage (Thomas 1995: 54).

As distance learners' characteristics are different from students in traditional universities. They are generally adult learners, mature, employed, and have family responsibilities. They have higher motivation and are willing to take responsibility for their own education. Their goals are often more clear cut. Distance learners are self-directed, and study on an independent basis. They learn in a variety of ways and take control over their learning. They often experience a feeling of isolation and remoteness from other students. Access can be direct e.g. face to face, or mediated by printed materials, e.g. manuals and brochures, or mediated by technology, using a variety of media such as telephone, voice mail, web site, and email. Successful direct access is characterized by flexibility, reliability, availability, user-friendliness, portability, efficiency and service ability.

STOU Distance education system

Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (STOU) was officially established by the royal charter on September 5, 1978, as the eleventh state university of Thailand, in order to provide the people of Thailand with increased educational opportunities at the university level. It was the first open university and the first true distance teaching

university in Thailand and in Southeast Asia to use the distance-education system. Since its founding, STOU has attracted world-wide attention for its innovative multi-media approach to distance education. It has been honored by UNESCO as a leading institution in distance education, acting as the center for the coordination of activities among open universities in Asia and the Pacific. It was also granted the 1992 Asian Management Award in Development Management from the Asian Institute of Management, and the 1995 Institution Award of Excellence from the Commonwealth of Learning and the International Council for Distance Education.

STOU provides both degree and non-degree programs to meet the demands of individuals and agencies for personal and professional development. To upgrade professional qualifications of the working people and to provide increased educational opportunities for secondary school graduates, STOU under twelve schools, offers four levels of degree programs: doctoral, master, bachelor, and certificate.

STOU has been developed in harmony with the information age and the national educational reform. "STOU Plan 2000" and "STOU Graduate Distance Education System" geared more towards computer-based, resource-based and learner-centered orientation.

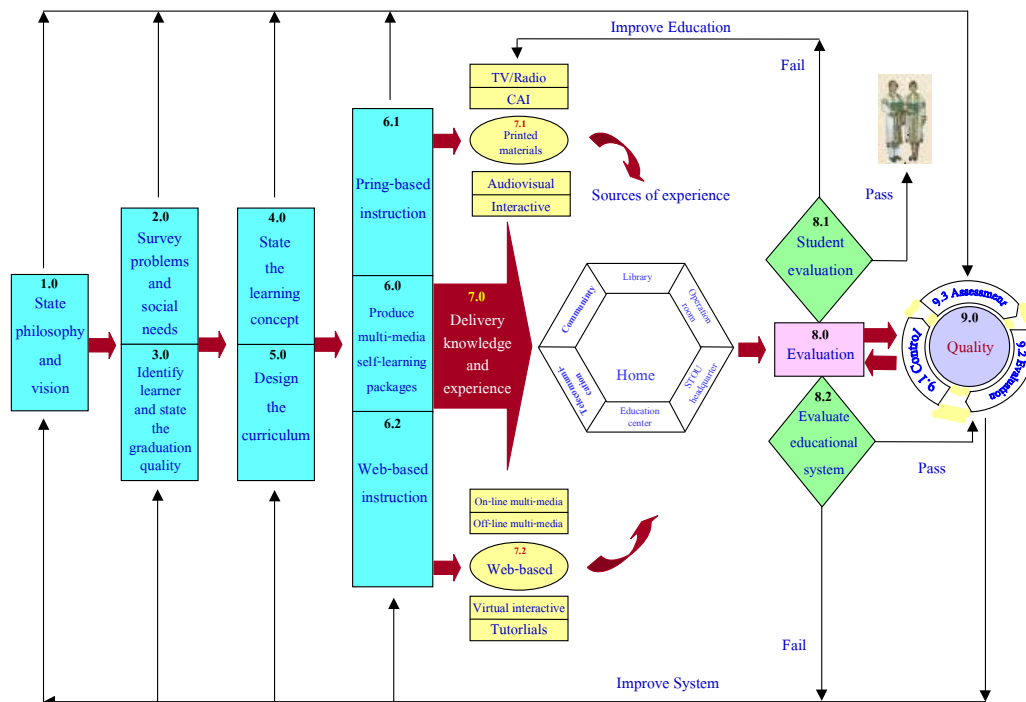


Figure 1 STOU Plan 2000 (STOU 2000)

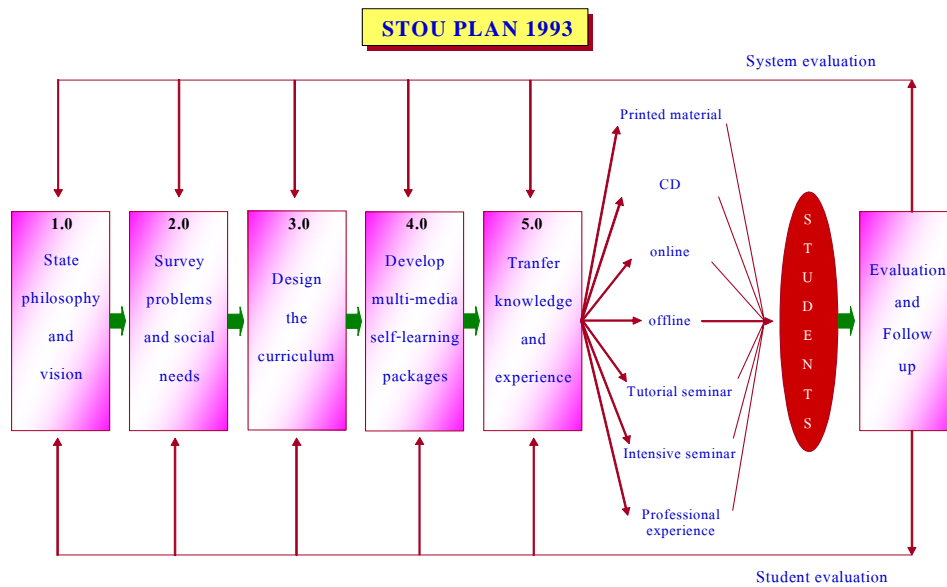


Figure 2 STOU Graduate Distance Education System

A learner-centered approach e- learning system at STOU

STOU is confronting tremendous pressures for changes mainly caused by a combination of information and communication technologies, the national educational reform agenda, the new teaching/ learning environment, quality assurance, and enormous expectations for higher education to deliver programs and products that match the ebb and flow of the needs of Thai society. Thus, STOU has to prepare to cope with these changes, in order to maintain its position as a leader in distance education as it has been recognized in the past. Green(2001 recommended that to put STOU into a place that would alter learning, and e- learning to take place, there must be three sets of changes running in parallel, involving people, technology and the organization.

The idea of elearning comes to STOU since 1985 through collaboration with Guelph university, Canada, using VITAL (Vidotext Integrated Teaching and Learning System) . In 1997, STOU started develop online network using LOTUS Learning Space in Virtual University Project which later on changed the name into STOU Online learning. In 2004 , the university announced the policy to be e-University, and STOU strategic plan 2009 – 2013 , using the ICT and e learning

strategies to make the teaching/learning more interesting, more efficient and promote a student centered approach to learning. The Learning Management System (LMS) --- A tutor, an open source developed by the University of Toronto, Canada, has been implemented. In addition, the idea of establishing “STOU Learning Design Center”, utilizing I5/ designing 4Learning: a student centered learning model and course design process is ongoing.

“STOU Plan 2000” and “STOU Graduate Distance Education System 1993” use elearning as a supplement. This is flexibly customized and generally regarded as a promising mode of delivery that geared more towards learner-centered orientation. Bunchua (2008: 63) said that blended learning is more effective for Thai students than pure online learning, unlike students from other countries.

Major issues can be seen as follows:

1. *Learners' needs and characteristics are the focus of the program*

Identifying the educational needs of the target groups through preliminary surveys and research. Is one major stage of the “STOU Plan 2000” and “STOU Graduate Distance Education System.” Findings were taken into account and set up in the design of curriculum, the development of course modules and instructional multi-media, establishing the delivery system and evaluation, in such a way to suit the characteristics and needs of learners, and facilitate the use of distance teaching techniques.

2. *Access is learner choice* STOU e-learning system is flexible with variable times and locations, whether at work or at home which is a concept of lifelong education and self-development. It enables students in diverse localities and with diverse backgrounds to undertake the course of study independently by themselves, encourages self-directed learning, self reflection, and just in time learning. Time to learn is expanded to fit individual needs. Various technologies and activities are used to facilitate learning, reach of the classroom and broadens the scope of conventional distance education to anywhere, any time and any pace. Flexible access to content and learning resources via elearning system is learner choice.

3. *Learners are active partners in the learning process* STOU e-learning system accommodates an individual's learning style, promotes active learning,

collaborative learning, distributed learning, self-study, autonomous learning and independent study. STOU elearning enables learners to study efficiently by themselves, in accordance with their individual preparedness, personal convenience and personal interests. However, as many learners still face problems relating to information literacy competencies and technological network that limit access to the internet, the off-line and printed media were developed to bridge the digital divide.

4. *Learner is in control of the learning experience* STOU engage learners by acknowledging prior learning. The academic structure in the “STOU Plan” is based on the principle of course integration and is primarily of an interdisciplinary program. Through a learner-centered system, life and education are identical. Learning takes place in a real situation, focusing on a learner’s life experiences. Individual students are encouraged to learn from their experience, and his or her workplace. It is able integrate diverse skills and professional backgrounds (Markowitz 1990: 49). E-learning has increasingly been integrated in the curriculum both in the course content and the teaching and learning process to promote an effective educational environment in the digital age and enhance learners’ new competencies and skills.

Learner-centered e-learning approach: STOU Graduate Information Science Program experience

Education in library and information science has changed dramatically over the past ten years. Elearning has gained its popularity in the field of library and information science. As part of STOU virtual campus project, various administrative facilities are being developed. E-learning, web and associated technologies are more focused in the information science content and led to changes in teaching and learning environment to a virtual situation especially at the graduate level. E learning has been used in all graduate courses as a support and an integration of printed-based and physical contact to facilitate the teaching/learning process.

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STOU information science graduate program used a learner-centered approach system as described. Take a graduate course “Research in Information Science” of which the author is the chair of the course team as a case study for its student centered approach elearning .

Course design: The learner is the beginning and the end point of the learning process . The course team define the learners' course competencies to achieve ; the learning environments for the learners to master the required competencies, establishing ongoing feedback to assist learner in mastering required competencies. All information science graduate students are required the achievement of mastering computer literacy and have their own computers with internet access at home or at their workplace.


Course production STOU transfers knowledge and experience in research in information science to graduate students through self-instructional packages in a variety of media formats, textbooks, study guides, CD , online learning, a new set of tools that can add value to all the conventional distance learning and suit the needs and the learning style of each student. Key contents of the fifteen units from the textbooks are chosen and designed in the form of power points, using text, visual and multi media. Each module takes about fifteen to twenty minutes for self study

Course delivery A variety of ways of learning and of learning opportunities are provided - teachers engage in synchronous as well as asynchronous interaction across space, time and pace, distributed learning , situated learning and shared learning environment .

Communication tools Interactions with the instructors and peers on webboards, real time chat, discussion forum, email, discussion groups and real –time conferencing are included in all courses , connect participants with each other and archive of each learner's work and interactions is kept as part of students' learning assessment.

Resources The course team researches the availability of resources that are appropriate for inclusion in the course, define and implement resources needed within the student centered learning environment, to assist learner in mastering required competencies. Students are required to carry out a number of exercises and assignments online which focus of the utilization of the various electronic databases and digital collection which are provided to students by the Office of Documentation and Information which is the university library and through its

University network as well as extensive sources of the course on the Internet and web link .



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Evaluation and follow-up Students can evaluate their learning progress through self assessment from pretest and posttest and exercises at the end of the course in various forms: multiple choice, fill in the blank, short answer, survey

questions, essays , case studies Students get the assignments, where they have to access to various resources for research in information science through internet and university databases. The information retrieved is evaluated, organized, condensed and presented to the seminar session.

Instructors provide feedback based on the learners' effort to master competencies.. Students are guided to “learner-centered courses” , by mobilizing motivation and emotional engagement with the task, using problems in context and recognizing the context of the learner, challenges learners by questioning assumptions they bring to the activity and those they develop through it, encouraging learners to go beyond what is provided and creating situations where they are required to take responsibility for their own learning and involve practice through demonstrating what has been learned for themselves and for others and reflecting on and making sense of experiences.

Conclusion

E learning is an attractive mode of flexible distance learning which is a fully integrated instructional medium.. It enables individuals to learn by themselves and encourages self-directed learning, self reflection, learner-centered learning and just in time learning. Elearning is challenging Thai library and information science educators and STOU to find that best suit to the nature of library and information science and particularly to the Thai context. Some fundamental problems in the implementation of eLearning are lack of motivation, lack of encouragement, no incentives in the point of view of instructors, and causes burden from additional work, poor infrastructure and technical reliable software and hardware The challenge . therefore, is to understand the nature of elearning from the learner-centered perspective.. For the success of STOU, to cope with the vision of the university towards e university , a university policy and strategic planning together with a commitment from all STOU parties at all levels especially the top administrators and more research are needed.

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