eLearning Short Courses for 52,000 SME Students

Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman
CEO, College of Internet Distance Education
charm@ksc.au.edu

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Chitapa Ketavan
CAO, College of Internet Distance Education
chitapaktv@au.edu

Dr. Firouz Anaraki
CTO, College of Internet Distance Education
firouz@ksc.au.edu

Abstract - About 99% of businesses in Thailand are Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Thai SMEs contribute about 39% of the Gross Domestic Product and about 29% of exports. About 76% of the workforce in Thailand are working in SMEs. Therefore, it is highly desirable to provide more education to people working in SMEs. The most appropriate mode to deliver education to them is eLearning in which anyone in SMEs can take at any time and from any place. This paper presents the development of 18 eLearning short courses for eSMEs University project by the College of Internet Distance Education (CIDE) at Assumption University of Thailand. Development of Courseware was done in 2 phases during 2 consecutive years, 2007 and 2008. Twelve online courses were developed in the Phase I in the year 2007, and six more courses in the Phase II in the year 2008. All 18 courses are available online free of charge, including free examination, free certificates, and free reception if the graduates physically participate in the certificate awarding ceremony at Srisakdi Charmonman IT Center. Of course, certificate can be sent thru the postal mail if the graduate can not attend the ceremony. As of October 2009, there have been about 52,000 students and the number is increasing at the rate of about 2,000 more students per month.

Keywords - Online Short Courses, eLearning, Courseware Production, SMEs.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Industrial Promotion of Thailand stated that over 90% of businesses in Thailand are small and medium enterprises (SMEs) [1]. The National Economic and Social Development Board emphasized the need to provide more education for SME [2]. From the Plan to Promote SMEs for the years 2007 – 2011 [3], Thai SMEs constitute a major part of the Thai economy. Thai SMEs account for about 99% of all businesses in Thailand. About 76% of Thailand workforce are in SMEs. Thai SMEs contribute 39% of the Gross Domestic Product and about 29% of exports. Therefore, it is highly desirable to produce eLearning courses to provide more education to people working in Thai SMEs.

In the year 2000, the Board of the Office of Small and Medium Enterprises Promotion (OSMEP) passed a resolution for OSMEP to be the center of SMEs promotion with two major roles [4]. In the first role, OSMEP acts as a central planning office to coordinate the action plans of all relevant offices in promoting SMEs in Thailand. In the second
role, OSMEP take charges of SMEs promotional activities not yet implemented or implemented but not yet effectively serve SMEs entrepreneurs.

In January 2007, executives from OSMEP visited Prof.Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman and his team at the College of Internet Distance Education to see a presentation of the big picture of eLearning, a demonstration of the Learning Management System named “SCITplus” and courseware for various programs [5]. They were impressed and started negotiation for CIDE to implement “eSMEs University” to offer 12 eLearning courses for SMEs in Thailand. OSMEP paid CIDE about 147,000 US$.

Assumption University (AU) is the first international university in Thailand. Fully accredited as an institution of higher learning by the Ministry of Education in Thailand, it currently serves about 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students from more than 80 countries. The University is a non-profit institution administered by the Brothers of St. Gabriel, a worldwide Catholic religious order, founded in France in 1705 by St. Louis Marie De Montfort, devoted to education and philanthropic activities. The congregation has been operating many educational institutions in Thailand since 1901 [6].

At the meeting on April 25, 2002, the Board of Trustees of Assumption University approved the proposal from Prof.Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman to establish of the College of Internet Distance Education. With the support of Rev. Bro. Dr. Prathip Martin Komolmas, President Emeritus, and Rev. Bro. Dr. Bancha Saenghiran, the President of Assumption University, Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonman and his team offer eLearning degree and non-degree courses and make the College: "One-Stop Services for Worldwide E-Education for Anyone, from Anywhere, and at Any Time." [7].

The College has been offering four degree programs in the eLearning mode. They are MS in Management since the year 2005, MS in ICT since the year 2006, MS eLearning Methodology since the year 2009, and Ph.D. in eLearning Methodology which is the first and the only one in the world. In addition to the four degree programs, CIDE also offer the Graduate Diploma in Teaching Profession and the 18 courses for SMEs.

OSMEP and CIDE signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to develop online courses to provide lifelong learning opportunities to all SME members and those who might be interested in establishing their own businesses throughout Thailand but cannot afford time to attend training classes regularly due to time and/or place constraints and/or for busy work schedules. The objectives of this cooperation were to assist, develop, and support small to medium sized enterprises:

1. To improve efficiency and motivation of entrepreneurs and those interested in establishing businesses. The information provided will support the entrepreneurs to operate their business effectively in today competitive business environment.

2. To equip business owners with information and views to manage business more effectively through the means of Internet in various area such as marketing, accounting & finance, techniques of creating business plans and exchanging of business experience.

3. To provide experience in business operation both theoretically and practically through seminar, workshop and field visits.

4. To support and create new potential entrepreneurs with the foundation of knowledge based SMEs according to the national policy to promote SMEs.

The coursewares are offered to anyone interested free of charge. About 20,000 students enrolled the year 2007. Then in the year 2008, OSMEP paid CIDE about 73,500 US$ to develop another 6 coursewares. As of October 2009, there have been over 52,000
students in the eSMEs University and the number grows every month at about 2,000 per month.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF SHORT COURSES

After the MOU was signed in April 2007, regular meetings were conducted at the OSMEP to plan for the development of the 12 eLearning short courses as follows:

1. SME101 SMEs Business Perception for Beginners
2. SME102 Foundation Marketing Management for SMEs
3. SME103 Financial Administration for SMEs
4. SME104 Accounting and Financial Budgeting Management for SMEs
5. SME105 Product Management and Services Administration for SMEs
6. SME106 SMEs Business Administration for Growing Sustainable Development
7. SME107 Business Opportunity Analysis and Strategic for SMEs
8. SME108 Creative Innovation for SMEs
9. SME109 Information Communication Technology and e-Commerce for SMEs
10. SME110 SMEs Business and Marketing
11. SME111 Risk Management and Controlling Internal Organization
12. SME112 Business SMEs Plan Writing

Content Experts (CE) were selected from professionals in the field of business and industry as well as academicians working at OSMEP and Assumption University as. A committee was also set up comprising some executives and staff from OSMEP and CIDE in addition to CE to plan the contents and objectives of every course and also to review it after the courseware production is accomplished. It was also decided to prepare 3 online courses (courseware) in parallel. Every courseware comprised 5 units and every unit contained a video lecture of approximately one hour length plus some other subject materials in the form of PDF documents, PowerPoint slides, MP3 audio lectures, and other activities depending on CEs. Video clips for each unit is designed by the CE who is assisted by an instructional designer (ID) and her team.

Three teams of Technology staff comprising of instructional designers (IDs), programmers, web and graphic designers, and video editors were assigned to develop 3 coursewares in parallel. Each courseware production team is lead by an ID who works closely with the CE to translate the course material into electronic format, to prepare PowerPoint slides and graphics or animation needed for a given topic, and to finally invite the CE to the studio at the SCIT Center to record a video lecture of a unit at a time. After a video lecture was taken, and edited by video editors, the team synchronized the video lectures with PowerPoint slides and/or other material, i.e. graphics, animation, or simulation to present a unit of lecture using multimedia.

For its Learning Management Systems (LMS), CIDE had adopted the Open Source Moodle and has modified it and has added many new features over the years to suit the requirement of the College for its eLearning programs. The new LMS has been called SCIT Plus, in honor of Prof. Dr. Srisakdi Charmonam, the founder and the CEO of the College. One of the main features of the SCIT Plus is its video presentation software which has gone through many phases of development. It is called PowerFx and it is currently in its 4th generation of its development. The PowerFx video presentation uses video files in Flash format so that all users under Windows, Macintosh, or Linux could access and watch the video lectures. For video broadcasting, PowerFx uses streaming technology which makes video loading and watching video lectures quite fast. Figure 1 shows an example of an earlier version of PowerFx.
As shown in Figure 1, the screen is divided into 3 portions. The video of the lecture is running on the top right corner of the screen, the main window on the left displays the PowerPoint slides, or other text or graphics or animation material, and on the bottom right, the main topics within a given unit are displayed so that the user could select a given topic and start watching the video lecture from that topic onward. The PowerFx has the capabilities of displaying any particular window at any given time, and a user could rewind, fast forward, pause, and play at any time.

III. SHORT COURSES ONLINE

The Technology Division at the College of Internet Distance Education started production of these short courses immediately after the MOU was signed. On average, it took almost 2 weeks to complete one unit of the courseware including video taking, video editing, video production, preparation of PowerPoint slides, graphics, and etc., and finally to synchronize and make the unit available online. In general, it took approximately 10 weeks to produce a complete 5 unit courseware for this project.

By July 2007 the first 3 short courses were online for viewing and learning. The users could register online for free of charge, and after registration, a user-ID and password were sent to the user to login into the eSMEs University LMS. The banners were placed at the websites of Assumption University, CIDE, and OSMEP as shown in Figure 2 for those interested to study online. Most of the users (more than 80%) were owners or employees of SMEs in various areas of business, industry, and manufacturing throughout the country.

By December 2007, all the 12 courses were online. Originally these online courses were placed on an existing CIDE server located at the SCIT Center which provided service to CIDE degree programs. Later all the eSMEs University courses were hosted on a dedicated server due to the traffic and many users accessing these online courses concurrently. This dedicated server with streaming technology and RED5 Flash software improved the speed of access to the online courses substantially. There are links to study these courses online from the SME as well as the CIDE websites and the direct URL is at: http://sme.cide.au.edu/sme.

After the significant success of these 12 courses and the fact that many SME members as well as many other interested people throughout Thailand registered and studied these courses online, OSMEP decided that the MOU should be extended for another year and that additional 6 courses be developed as follows:

1. SME201 Role of the Office of SMEs Promotion
2. SME202 Product Brand Production
3. SME203 Knowledge Management for Small and Medium Enterprises
4. SME204 Capital Management Administration
5. SME205 Import and Export Management
6. SME206 Supply Chain and Logistics Management

The courseware production and development of these additional 6 online courses took almost 5 months.

IV. USAGE OF THE 18 COURSES

By October 2009, about 52,000 users have registered to eSMEs University to study one or more courses online. From CIDE records, it was found that around 70% of the online students study more than 8 courses. The number of users who have completed each of the 18 courses is shown in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Course</th>
<th>No. of users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SME101</td>
<td>2981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME102</td>
<td>1362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME103</td>
<td>1076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME104</td>
<td>871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME105</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME106</td>
<td>682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME107</td>
<td>653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME108</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME109</td>
<td>723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME110</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME111</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME112</td>
<td>1293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME201</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME202</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME203</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME204</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME205</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME206</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>13,323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CIDE holds 3 online tests per year for each online course. The passing grade for each course is 50%. Students who wished to receive certificates of completion issued jointly by CIDE and OSMEP could register online for an online test for any of the online courses. On the day of test, the students could login and took the exam in allotted time and if passed, the student would receive a certificate of completion. More than 10% of those who completed an online course took the online test to receive the certificate. It seems the majority of students preferred to study only to learn for themselves rather than taking the test to receive a certificate.

For the quality control and improving the project an online survey was conducted in the middle of 2008 to collect some information from students who had been studying online for one or more eSMEs courses. A total number of 275 students answered the online questionnaire. As shown in Figure 3, the students are 62.2% male and 37.8% female.

As shown in Figure 4, the majority of students are in the age group of 26-35, followed by the age group of 36-45 who are usually categorized as young entrepreneurs or professionals with some IT literacy.
Figure 5 shows the educational level of the students. The majority (58.5%) of students who studied the online short courses hold bachelor degree, followed by those who hold master degrees (35.6%). It can be concluded that most entrepreneurs in Thailand are well educated and they want to improve their knowledge.

Five questions were given and students were asked to select if they strongly agree, slightly agree, neutral, slightly disagree, or strongly disagree. The questions are as follows:

[1] CEs exhibited sound knowledge of the course.

[2] CEs explained the contents clearly.

[3] The examples and case studies were helpful in directing my learning.

[4] Texts, pictures, and graphics were clear.


As seen in Figure 7, in answering question #1, the majority of respondents agreed with the good quality of the contents and expressed their satisfaction with the Content Experts (CEs). This is the highest points received among the 5 questions which indicates that the CEs selected were experts in their fields and could present the subject very well. Question #4 received the lowest mark which is still quite good (slightly agree), the technical team and the CE could have added additional texts, pictures, or graphics to improve the content.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on the survey conducted, remarks received from students and the exam results of those students who took the online tests, it is evident that majority of students agreed that the eSMEs University short courses
have been useful for them and they have learned to improve their businesses or get the ideas on how to set up and improve a business.

Some students revealed their lack of knowledge of IT to start and learn online. Some students in some provinces commented about the lack of broadband in their respective cities and the slow access to video online as their main concerns.

In fact, studying online needs self motivation and discipline to start and continue the online studies. Many students started a course, studied some units from various courses but did not finish any of them. It was probably due to lack of motivation or lack of interest in obtaining a certificate. However, these 18 online training courses are lifelong learning for those interested to study anytime and anywhere.

The authors believe that this project has not been well promoted among the public in general or among the various universities. If a budget for advertising and promotion of the eSMEs University project had been allocated and some marketing and PR had taken place, this project could have attracted many more students studying in the field of business or whose parents owns their own small or medium enterprise.

REFERENCES
(In the order of citation similar to the footnotes)