

report for Quality Enhancement and Assurance Sub-Committee

Taking a MOOC: reflections upon the University of Saskatchewan's 'Introduction to Learning Technologies', Oxford Brookes University's 'Teaching Online Open Course', and the Open University's 'Open Learning Design Studio'

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this paper is a collaborative effort by recent MOOC participants from Loughborough University including Samantha Davis, Maurice FitzGerald, Farzana Khandia, Deena Ingham, Caroline Smith (all Teaching Centre) and Martin Ashby (Academic Registry)

executive summary

This paper considers the experiences of a number of Loughborough University staff in recently taking a variety of Massive Open Online Courses – it is being tabled for information purposes, but it is also being disseminated to fellow online participants as a course output.

introduction

A number of Loughborough University colleagues working in Academic Registry and the Teaching Centre have undertaken a Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) in the last eighteen months; this paper seeks to focus on and provide feedback regarding those experiences from the perspective of the participants, particularly in terms of lessons learned.

The first MOOC is entitled [Introduction to Learning Technologies](#) and was run this spring by the University of Saskatchewan, the second is the [Teaching Online Open Course](#) which is being run at this moment by Oxford Brookes University, and the third involved an earlier MOOC, the [Open Learning Design Studio](#), which was run by the Open University in early 2013.

In essence, this report has a number of different aims:

- it allows us to reflect upon our experiences of undertaking a MOOC by considering each of these three examples in turn;
- it highlights the pros and cons from the participants' point of the view based upon these three case studies; and
- it considers some of the design lessons which might help or hinder student engagement in MOOCs.

This paper is being tabled at Quality Enhancement and Assurance Sub-Committee (QEASC) for information purposes, but is it also being shared with the wider MOOC communities both as an output from our participation and as a means of disseminating our findings.

literature review

Readily available resources on this issue are starting to appear ever more regularly, leading to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) recently issuing a [Statement on Massive Open Online](#)

[Courses](#) in order to provide a framework within which sectoral provision of MOOCs might be considered.¹ This follows hot on the heels of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) report regarding [The pedagogy of the Massive Online Course: the UK view](#) which looks at the kinds of MOOCs on offer in the country, as well as “what it means to 'teach' in the open and at massive scale ... and what kinds of demands and expectations are experienced by academics” who deliver them.²

Commentaries upon MOOCs are becoming increasingly considered and constructive in the criticism offered, as well as being made ever more accessible. For example, [Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses](#) by Steven Krause and Charles Lowe (eds.) is a collection of essays by academic staff who have developed and run them, as well as students who have taken them.³ As one of the contributors to this collection subsequently blogged: “The MOOC is not going to go away, but it will merely be (like television and all of the other electronic possibilities that were to ‘save’ education) a tool and not a solution”.⁴

Indeed, at the [Learning Lives Conference](#) held at Birkbeck, University of London on 26 March 2014, Christine Redecker (European Commission Joint Research Centre, Institute for Prospective Technological Studies) said it was considered globally that we are currently in a trough of disillusionment with the ‘hype cycle’ for MOOCs. Those in the United States of America developing MOOCs have recognised that there is a significant role for pedagogic research and expert support in learning/teaching knowledge in order to enable these courses to attract, retain and support students effectively. Conceived following work here in the UK and internationally, Gilly Salmon offers a five stage framework to aid those developing online provision; she suggests graded levels of activity to promote learner engagement and to support learner development, an approach that has subsequently been widely used by online developers.⁵ With correct pedagogic input and expertise, Redecker’s work indicates that MOOCs, as part of Higher Education collaborative hubs, will become significantly productive both educationally and economically by 2017.⁶

Meanwhile, the HEA event [Changing the Learning Landscape – From OERs to MOOCs](#), which was held at the University of Leeds on 31 March 2014, also presented plenty of food for thought.⁷ As one of our colleagues reported back:

If we are to develop further MOOCs, it is important to note that we are unlikely to have a return in financial investment. A couple of institutions – namely the University of Leicester and the Open University – estimated that their MOOCs had cost them around £30,000 each in development time, with only four or five participants from the MOOC enrolling onto a full programme following completion of the MOOC. With that in mind, Loughborough University might want to consider other motivations for developing MOOCs, such as:

- seeing it as a marketing opportunity;
- increasing our reputation for good teaching by releasing materials as Open Educational Resources;
- providing additional resources for current students;
- showcasing the University to prospective students (e.g. through taster sessions);
- providing digital material to disadvantaged learners; and
- engaging new global audiences.

The challenge we have is that academics do not necessarily want to make their materials available externally, this is one barrier we would need to overcome if we are to move into this open area. The support infrastructure around a MOOC is another point to address given that they can attract thousands of participants. You could have a model whereby you leave the participants to work through the course with minimal input from the lecturer, however this can result in disengagement from the course. If, however, you want participants to complete the MOOC from start to finish, then this really does require more engagement from the lead academic to respond to questions and to participate more fully. Given that MOOCs are typically twelve weeks long, this is not unrealistic or unmanageable. It is important to note that you cannot judge a MOOC as being successful by simply looking at the number of participants

who have completed. Participants may have other motivations for enrolling on a MOOC, and they may have gained whatever it is they were seeking from the course well before completion.

Added to the launch this spring of freely available online courses through [FutureLearn](#) – which in Loughborough’s case means [Innovation and enterprise](#) (a six week course which offers participants “the opportunity to learn how an innovative idea becomes a reality”) and [Getting a grip on mathematical symbolism](#) (a three week course aimed at teaching “aspiring engineers and scientists to think mathematically and explore essential concepts”)⁸ – there really is no shortage of offerings, or for that matter coverage, within the Higher Education sector, in relatively mainstream press or in specialist literature.⁹ The advice available in terms of course design and management is profuse,¹⁰ even if Stanford University’s President, John Hennessy, concedes that this is a “period of great experimentation” with MOOCs doing a particularly good job of ‘educating the educators’.¹¹ Thus, how all of this might work for courses and their participants in the medium, never mind the long, term is very much open to question. For now, the recent experiences of some Loughborough staff taking MOOCs provided by other institutions may be worth exploring.

University of Saskatchewan – [Introduction to Learning Technologies](#)

The Saskatchewan course ran for thirteen weeks this spring and saw three of us exploring a number of learning technologies, many of them new to us all, some for which we have a degree of experience; it also saw us producing various resources, a number of which are alluded to in this short report. The platform used for this course is based on Wordpress.¹² Feedback from the Loughborough participants states:

- *“I chose to take on this MOOC on the basis that: (a) I had never tried one before; (b) the subject matter was familiar, thereby allowing me to watch how the topics were unfolded within the MOOC; and (c) it had been flagged up by colleagues in the Teaching Centre, who would therefore become a de-facto study group. The latter point is really important – trying to fit committing to a course in an already busy work/life balance was only ever going to work if there was a social structure from which to gain support. The scaffolding provided by our study group helped ensure my continued commitment to the cause. Our weekly meetings provided the friendly peer pressure needed to work through the course content. Taking part in the MOOC allowed me to think through some of the e-learning related challenges ahead, and begin to plan the work as part of the coursework set by the course leader.”*
- *“I’ve enjoyed and benefitted from the structure, support and conviviality offered through this MOOC, but the fact is that I effectively dropped out early on. Indeed, apart from blogging and tweeting, which included a better understanding of image ownership and attribution, I’ve not made full use of what is on offer. I’m not necessarily sure if I will return to it in a structured way. I hope that I will, as there is so much to learn from the resources on offer and the contacts made. But I do hope to drop into the UofS TOOC again at some point soon! Overall, my sense is that taking on such a course is a relatively big commitment, certainly within the context of other work imperatives, so a valuable lesson has been learned.”*
- *“I signed up to this TOOC to learn more about Learning Technologies and to see if there were any fresh ideas from other people to increase my e-learning knowledge when it comes to advising Loughborough academics on tools to use. I found that the length of the course was just right as it included a reading week and also a week free of content each time we had an assignment to do. The assignments themselves were set at the right level and were achievable whilst also stretching us to try new technologies. In summary, I think the course was pitched at an appropriate level and although there were some weeks I felt I had fallen behind the content wasn’t too overbearing to be able to catch up again.”*

The length of the course and its international coverage were two issues which came up in discussion. The perception that you might be able to catch up during a longer course is a mistake – the longer the course, the greater the workload. It also highlighted the problem of being insufficiently engaged with the MOOC; if you fall behind during a course you are not

wholly committed to, you will drop out. It is worth noting that the creation of a local study group meant that interaction with international participants felt unnecessary or indeed a distraction from the course itself, though it did promote progression and peer support, which to some degree did support meeting the four assessment points. In addition, it should be said that the proliferation of technologies meant that not all of them were exploited; for example, the Google Hangout forum for the course remained sparsely populated, mostly by early adopter types, so the drive to participate there was minimal and self-regulating. Other technologies, such as the blogs appear to have been utilised more, and thus appeared to be more effective.

Overall, this carefully crafted and considered course allowed participants to explore a number of technologies, and to try them out in a safe and supportive environment whereby people got out of the course at least as much as they put into it. Consideration regarding whether and/or how to monetarise this course is clearly an issue for all future designers – this MOOC bore no credit for international participants, but the lack of cost (apart from time) for the participants may well have been outweighed by the goodwill generated, and the lessons learned can be applied both at Saskatchewan and beyond.

Oxford Brookes University – [Teaching Online Open Course](#)

The Oxford Brookes course is running this spring for six weeks (with an Easter break of two weeks) and has seen three colleagues focus on a separate topic related to online teaching each week, all of which was supported by multi-media resources, selected reading and discussion forums. The course was free to complete, but there was an option to pay £425 for 10 M-level credits. The only difference between this credit bearing version and the free version was a 2,000 word reflective essay. The platform used for this course is Moodle. The Oxford Brookes staff are experienced deliverers of this programme. When underway, the MOOC was supported by three course tutors, one course administrator and seven teaching assistants who oversaw the technical aspects of the MOOC. Feedback from the Loughborough participants states:

- *“I signed up for this course because it was Moodle based and thought I would therefore be familiar with the environment. However, many of the week 1 activities were what I now know is called ‘off platform’, i.e. I had to sign up for a Twitter account and create a Mozilla account in order to participate fully, and I found that all rather too daunting. The webinars (via Adobe connect) were similarly ‘multi channel’ – which I realise is only equivalent to talking to the lecturer/other students during lectures – but I was expected to watch the webinar, text in my contributions via the chat function and presumably even record my own thoughts/make my own notes on any learning taking place whilst watching/listening/typing/reacting. Foolishly, I kept comparing my virtual experience to that of a real life classroom and perhaps that’s where I went wrong. The two experiences require different approaches to learning and my innate ‘reflective observer’ style is perhaps not best suited to learning online.”*
- *“There is a clear structure to this course. Each week’s topic is introduced by a short text introduction followed by a series of group and/or individual activities and a list of readings. One of the readings is a core reading. My motivations for enrolling onto this course were to see the ways in which online courses are delivered, managed and supported. I didn’t participate much in the activities, other than dip in and out to look at the sort of things being posted by others. I did find it quite difficult to keep up with the wealth of information given to us each week, but what I did find quite encouraging was the use of Mozilla Open Badges as a reward for completing the set activities for the week.”¹³*
- *“My reason for registering on this course was to find out more about online learning as well as learning a bit more about designing assessment. I found this course very difficult to get into and after the first two weeks of trying to follow the content I realised that it wasn’t realistic to expect myself to complete everything the course was asking for. The amount of reading was overbearing along with the amount of time they asked to be spent on activities. In comparison to other online courses I have taken, this one felt a lot more onerous. I understand that some of the participants had paid for the credit bearing*

version of the course, therefore a substantial amount of work and readings was necessary. However I think there could have been more of an explicit difference between the amount of work expected of the credit bearing students in comparison to myself and others who had opted for the free version.”

Overall, the feedback from participants is that this course is well structured and consists of a variety of online tools, but continued participation throughout its duration, as perhaps envisaged by the designers, was not the main purpose of those Loughborough colleagues taking part.

Open University – [Open Learning Design Studio MOOC](#)

The Open University course ran for nine weeks and saw a colleague undertake it at the start of 2013 – the reflection offered here is included in order to widen the scope of this submission, and to add weight to the voices already given previously in this report:

- *“This MOOC ran between January and March 2013. There was confusion from the start because of the number and access to the apparent multiple platforms required; Cloudworks (which I and many others had not used), Bibsonomy, Google Hangout, Google Forum, Google Docs were all being used simultaneously for different purposes. Some participants resorted to collaborating via Facebook or email. [Evaluation of the course](#) by the academics running it, indicates the terminology and number of platforms were issues for many. In total, 2,420 participants registered on the course. By Week 9, ‘[t]here remained less than 25 active contributors...’, though numbers are not always as important as the learning journey. For those who completed, and the many who went part way on the journey, there was a learning advantage; but those left behind, as I was at the beginning, experienced immense and unnecessary frustration. The technology needs to be selected for a pedagogic purpose, not as an obstacle to be overcome, that is unless the technology is the purpose of the course.”*

Overall, the feedback received is that this course was very intensive in terms of the technological learning process and requirements, with the technology subsuming the learning for many instead of being a vehicle for it to take place effectively. As with the other two cases, there is a danger that the feedback given here may only appear to be critical, but it is intended to be constructive and insightful. Certainly, if this is the experience of educators, then this might be taken on board by those developing and/or refining MOOCs as there clearly is a future for them, they just need some defining.

advantages/disadvantages

In terms of our overarching findings, it is clear that there are some serious pros and cons for any participant in undertaking a MOOC, though the former can outweigh the latter if due care and attention is given during the design period and in terms of oversight:

pros	cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interaction among participants • flexibility of timetable – e.g. do the work or watch the online videos when you can • online chat tools can make you feel you are a part of something as you can see faces and speak to other people • no monetary cost involved in learning something new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • easy to fall behind because of other priorities beyond the course • assessment requires an investment of time and energy • familiarity with social networking tools is assumed • accreditation/certification may cost – if there is no cost involved participants can find it easier not to complete the course

This report has not reflected back as much on the benefits for the institution or the people running a course, but they clearly include profile, experience and knowledge garnered. For now, the main benefits appear to be for those taking part, though only if they enter into this process with their eyes wide open.

conclusions

This paper has sought to gather the views of a number of Loughborough University staff who have recently undertaken a MOOC. It is readily apparent that we are still in the relative infancy of these courses, but that they are going to feature as a means of learning into the near future. If nothing else, this early investment by institutions in MOOCs might want to have the current priorities and practices at the forefront of thinking. As our own Vice Chancellor has recently written, MOOCs “have the potential to bring us many benefits, for example acting as a ‘taster’ which will encourage people considering a university education to come to Loughborough”.¹⁴ Beyond that, it is more difficult to say what kind of impact they will have upon our sector, though regular cost/benefit analysis needs to be undertaken if institutions are going to invest in this mechanism beyond the current – i.e. relatively exploratory – stage that we have reached.

endnotes

1. QAA, “Statement on Massive Open Online Courses”, available at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/News/Documents/QAA-position-statement-MOOCs.pdf> [10 April 2014].
2. HEA, “The pedagogy of the Massive Open Online Course: the UK view”, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/elt/the_pedagogy_of_the_MOOC_UK_view [10 April 2014].
3. Steven Krause and Charles Lowe (eds.), *Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses* (Anderson, South Carolina: Parlor Press, 2014), available at http://www.parlorpress.com/pdf/invasion_of_the_moocs.pdf [10 April 2014].
4. Aaron Barlow, “Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promise and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses”, *Academe Blog* posting, available at <http://academeblog.org/2014/03/09/invasion-of-the-moocs-the-promise-and-perils-of-massive-open-online-courses/> [10 April 2014].
5. Gilly Salmon, *E-tivities: the key to active online learning* (London: Kogan Page, 2002).
6. Further information is available in the ‘Towards Open Higher Education 2030’ vision paper accessible at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9v2kvC9uL8A [10 April 2014].
7. Further information is available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/events/detail/2014/31_march_MOOC_CLL [15 April 2014].
8. Loughborough University resources on this issue include “Online learning” (available at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/study/online-learning/>), “New maths MOOC revealed by FutureLearn” (available at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/news-events/news/2014/january/12-futurelearn.html>), and “Start date confirmed for Innovation and Enterprise MOOC” (available at <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sbe/news/articles/2014/innovation-and-enterprise-mooc.html>) [all 15 April 2014].
9. Readily accessible examinations range from this month’s *BBC Music Magazine* article by Nick Shave entitled “Musicians on Demand” (May 2014) to the Case Centre’s recent posting regarding whether “To MOOC or not to MOOC?” (available at <http://www.thecasecentre.org/educators/casemethod/resources/features/moocs>) [24 April 2014].
10. For example, the *Tomorrow’s Professor* newsletter and website run by Rick Rice (Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University) has recently featured postings regarding “Techniques for Mastering MOOCs: from ‘Lecturelets’ to Stage Presence”, “Can Online Teaching Improve Face to Face Instruction”, and “Concerns and Opportunities for Online Student Retention” (these are all accessible via <http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php>) [15 April 2014].
11. Kathleen Sullivan, “Stanford, Cal leaders explore perspectives on online learning”, *Stanford News*, 11 March 2014 (available at <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/march/online-stanford-cal-031114.html>) [24 April 2014].
12. A tool used for blogging and/or creating websites, further information is available at <http://wordpress.com/> [16 April 2014].
13. Further information is available at <http://www.openbadges.org/> [16 April 2014].

14. Bob Allison, "MOOCs begin", *Vice Chancellor's E-Newsletter* – April 2014.