‘Sizing up’ the online course: Adapting learning designs to meet growing participant numbers

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Abstract. Online course design has experienced an upheaval recently with the arrival of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), turning the model which underpins many online courses on its head. In contrast to MOOCs, conventional online courses have usually been designed for small private groups of participants, giving access to closed content and online tutors able to cater for individual needs and provide personalised feedback on tasks. What principles and practical considerations underlie these different design approaches? The development of a pre-arrival online distance learning course for international students offered by an elearning unit in Modern Languages between 2005 and 2014 illustrates interesting aspects of this evolution. This course, focusing on English language development and transitions to UK academic culture, reflects an historical design shift from accommodating small tutored groups of 25 to an open student-driven course for over 2500 participants which exhibits features of emerging MOOCs. This paper will describe the evolution of this course design to allow a flexible response to needs in a changing learning context. Specific features of the learning design which have changed or remained constant will be identified and adaptations made to ‘size up’ the course and cater for growing numbers of participants will be highlighted.

Keywords: online course, MOOC, learning design, international students, course evolution.

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1. Introduction

The arrival of MOOCs is starting to create waves of impact across teaching and learning in higher education. Conventional online courses, designed for small private groups of participants, are also feeling the effect as designers consider how they might be scaled up to serve increasing numbers of students online. In offering an overview of the current MOOC landscape, Bayne and Ross (2013) acknowledge both the disruptive force that MOOCs represent and their capacity to act as a catalyst for innovation and change in the UK higher education sector. From their review of the MOOC literature, they identify several emerging themes:

- the troubling of the cMOOC/xMOOC binary;
- the teacher role;
- tensions around learner participation;
- the meanings and implications of 'massive';
- tracing the boundaries between openness and control (Bayne & Ross, 2013, p. 7).

The issues underlying all but one of these could be said to have equal relevance for the design of any online course. The use of the cMOOC or xMOOC label essentially differentiates the type of pedagogic approach (usually connectivist vs. didactic) reflected by the online learning environment, but as Bayne and Ross (2013) point out, in recent MOOCs surveyed, this distinction has been found to no longer be quite so clear-cut. Equally, this may be said to apply to the pedagogic design of other online courses, which can reflect mixed features.

This paper charts the changes in design of online courses produced by an elearning unit in Modern Languages at the University of Southampton, which have ranged from Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs) catering for closed groups of 25 students to a 'sized up' online course designed for, and open to, several thousand participants. It will highlight the impact that Web 2.0, innovations in online teaching and learning, and MOOCs have had on the evolution of this online course design.

2. The evolution of an online course

Since 2005, eLanguages, an elearning research and development team, has been running short courses online for international students. These focus on students' pre-arrival concerns and needs, introduce practical aspects of British life and

culture, and familiarise participants with effective study skills and aspects of UK academic culture which may present challenges as well as offering opportunities for language development (eLanguages, 2014).

2.1. Small private online courses

Our first online course, named *POPC* (Preparatory Online Pre-sessional Course) and subsequently renamed *Arrive UK*, was delivered intensively in fixed five-week time slots over the summer of 2005 to groups of students who had been accepted for study on a taught pre-sessional course but were still based in their home countries. They were tutored in groups of circa 25, learning from content designed as interactive learning objects and tutor-led discussions in forums. These virtual learning environment-hosted courses were optional and included no formal or self assessment. They contained text-based interactive activities but made little use of other media (audio or visual).

A few years later, the podcast revolution and new approaches to their integration in different teaching contexts, spearheaded by Salmon, Nie, and Edirisingha (2007), led us to experiment with short informal podcasts made by teachers and students, adding both listening content and more in-course tutor 'presence' and 'scaffolding' to the online course. The podcasts were well-received by students; however, their engagement in formal tutor-led discussion tasks, even if they were still using the course content (learning objects) independently, highlighted 'tensions around student participation' and the 'teacher role'. Was a formal tutor and guided discussion really needed on this type of course? The addition of weekly tutor-led (synchronous and text-based) chat sessions indicated that for some students, contact with the tutor and peers was important in order to ask specific questions and alleviate their pre-arrival anxiety. This all raised interesting questions about what students really wanted, content and/or contact and interaction, and brings to mind the 'connectivist vs. didactic model' and the more recent 'cMOOC/xMOOC binary' debate identified by Bayne and Ross (2013).

2.2. Sizing up the course and letting go of the tutor

Phase 2 of the evolution of our online course really began with Web 2.0. Concurrent with growth in open content, institutions, including our own, were making student-created content available through their own websites and via social media, such as *YouTube*, in order to reach prospective students. Such videos provided a taste of campus life and offered a far more effective insight for international students

than the traditional welcome document. Open student blogs also captured the experience of study abroad. Whereas previously we had needed to make all our own content, now we could curate these freely available resources for learning purposes and enhance our course with links to them. As well as extending the online course invitation to all incoming international students (circa 4000), sizing it up considerably, we also wanted to enhance the role of socialisation alongside academic acculturation.

We added a shared 'Social Wall', a Web 2.0 free application (e.g. *Linoit*; *Padlet*) as an ice-breaker, hosting students' short customised introductions and photos. We retained the discussion forum solely for student-driven extended conversations. Students created their own user community, started their own threads, answered each others' questions and shared contact details to meet and socialise 'off-course'. This adjustment in the 'boundaries of openness and control' took away the need for tutoring in this particular course, and so the course became untutored. It also became self-paced for the students, running from mid-April to early October and accommodating the international student community growing within it. In 2014, 3000 participants are expected to take part, suggesting it has reached MOOC-like proportions and raising Bayne and Ross' (2013) query over the 'meaning and implications of the word massive'.

3. Conclusions

The charting of this evolution illustrates how a 'conventional' online course in an educational context has benefited both from Web 2.0 innovation and openness, and from the impact of MOOCs to make itself more responsive to changing needs. Since 2005, modifications to the course tools, technologies and designs have, importantly, been driven by a desire to continually improve the student experience of the course. This has resulted in a rather hybridised approach to course design, retaining a core of provided course content (learning objects) and blending this with the connectivist possibilities produced by 'sizing up' to MOOC-like proportions. This paper has aimed to show how the evolutionary process of this online course has, interestingly, echoed the emerging issues of MOOCs identified by Bayne and Ross (2013).

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